

SPECIAL LIBRARY RECORDS MANAGEMENT – Liz Springer

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First of all...what is Records Management and what does it have to do with libraries and library technicians? By definition, Records Management (RM) is “the systematic control of recorded information acquired or received by an organization in connection with the transaction of business”. So, just as in libraries where there are processes in place to cover everything from acquisition of material through cataloguing, processing, circulation and eventual weeding, Records Management controls the lifecycle of records from their creation or acquisition through final disposition. By doing this, Records Management practitioners such as myself can ensure information is retained as long as necessary for business decision making, and to meet regulatory, legislative and legal requirements. Additionally, we can add value by managing space for physical records, and assist in reducing online space requirements (records are media independent) through the use of a retention schedule.

These days I don't actually get much hands-on work with the physical records, although with my team I'm accountable to manage over 350,000 physical onsite files. As someone who leads the records group for my Division I'm more of a coordinator, facilitator, coach, consultant and strategist; someone who can guide a records team through the fundamental components of a records program so we add value to our organization by protecting informational assets.

What's a typical day in my world? Well, the only typical things are meetings, some of which I facilitate, others in which I participate, and yet others that are workshop style where we brainstorm ideas. What's exciting about them to me are the variety of topics covered - every thing from space planning for the file rooms, electronic records strategies, database issues, marketing our records program, partnering initiatives with clients or IT, and of course, staffing. In addition to the meetings I spend a lot of time coaching my team and supporting them to ensure they have the skills and the tools they need to do their jobs. Then of course, there are many projects to work on.

So if I am in meetings, what is my team doing? They don't have nearly as many meetings as I do, but a typical day for them is about preparing files and filing documents (which isn't as easy as it sounds. For example, a well file can have up to 100 different types of documents classified in up to 7 different locations within the file) they index records into databases, label and barcode them, shelve them according to file keys (the same way books are shelved according to Dewey to Library of Congress), they issue User ID barcodes to our customers, search for records need and retrieve the files for circulation and then resshelf them when they're returned. And over the course of several months or a year, they do shelf reads and recalls, just like in a library. (You can probably see many parallels with the library world here.) The team also sends records to an offsite storage facility once they reach an inactive stage and are no longer required frequently, and retrieves them when necessary. This helps in managing on-site space requirements and reduces lease costs to the organization. The records are then stored offsite until they have met their retention period and can be destroyed. Essentially, they're the people who actually manage the lifecycle of the records.

Some of the team also scans documents so they are accessible online for our customers, others work exclusively with files required for divestitures as we sell properties, and yet others act as system administrators for our databases. Periodically they also work closely with customers designing new file keys and setting up new file series for us to manage. At times like this we always look to see if we can interface directly with client systems to minimize data entry into our database and increase data integrity.

Why did I get into Records Management? I knew from the start of my Library and Information Technology (LIT) schooling days that I was interested in working in a business setting rather than a school or academic setting, although of course I envisioned myself in a special library in oil and gas – a great build on my first career as a geophysical technician. And I actually did work on a contract basis in an oil and gas library when I first graduated from SAIT. But then my contract ended and I was given the opportunity to try my hand at records management. To be honest, the discipline of Records and Information Management (RIM) wasn't something I'd given much thought to, other than taking the optional course for my LIT diploma, but there was a wonderful lady, who I consider my unofficial mentor, running a RIM department who recognized that LIT graduates had some foundational organizational skills that were greatly transferable to the RM world. So – with nothing to lose and everything to learn, I jumped in with both feet and never really looked back. I'd found my niche!

So what are those transferable skills from LIT to RIM? The first thing that comes to mind for me is classification. Library technicians understand classification concepts and even though the RM world doesn't use Dewey or Library of Congress the graduates understand taxonomic structure – one of the fundamentals of an RM program. Another skill LIT grads bring is a basic understanding of databases - how to build, populate, and search them. They understand database structure; they can suggest and apply various validation rules to increase data integrity when populating databases; they don't raise an eyebrow at the thought of Boolean searching; and they automatically try various search terms even when there isn't an official thesaurus – in short, they know how to organize information so it is retrievable again. Another huge asset transferable from the LIT program is customer service – really trying to understand what it is the customer needs and getting it for them in the most appropriate manner. Patience really is a virtue some days, as is persistence!

But I think the greatest thing anyone can bring to the records world is the thirst for continuous learning, especially regarding technology. For years records practitioners have perfected the art of managing paper records throughout the lifecycle and although the amount of paper we still produce is in itself a challenge due to space requirements, it's nothing compared to the difficulties we're faced with regarding electronic records.

The exciting thing about Records is that it really does give library technicians an alternative career to pursue. It gives them another opportunity to take their technical skills, computer skills, and love of organizing information to a whole new level by building on that foundation and working with something different. In my 10 years since graduation from the LIT program I've seen an increasing number of library technicians move to the RM world where they go from managing paper to various other media – and facing the challenges that come with it. Records Management is not just filing! Certainly we're expected to manage

paper files in centralized and satellite file rooms, assist customers with organizing their departmental files, organize files on shared drives, and populate electronic document and records management systems. But we're also expected to look to the future and ensure all the records are protected and remaining accessible for the retention period – no mean feat when you consider some of the records we have must be retained permanently for the life of the organization. If that record is on paper or microform that's not so tough, but when you consider a record may be on something like a floppy disk there's trouble looming. Even now how many computers even have a disk drive that can read 5.25 inch or 3.5 inch disks? In another five years the hardware will essentially be non-existent, and if you do find one you'd better hope the software is also available, and then that the media hasn't degraded to the point where the disk can't be read. There are no easy answers to issues such as this, so the opportunities for growth and learning around records, especially electronic records are tremendous. Plus, the work just doesn't go away due to increased legislative and regulatory requirements for records (think Privacy Information or Sarbanes Oxley (SOX)).

What's fun about my job? Well – most things really, because when I'm really engaged at work I have fun! I think the most fun is when I'm able to work with my team, both those with LIT diplomas and those without, and get them to understand, really understand, the records is not just filing and that there are a myriad of possibilities for exciting work in records. It is fun when they catch the excitement and take additional records courses to expand their knowledge and can work on various projects. It's also fun when I have the IT groups coming to me to make sure they're embedding RM principles in new applications they're building for their clients. That says to me that they are starting to understand records management, to recognize that records have a lifecycle, and they are acknowledging the role we play in the organization. My team also has fun marketing Records Management and creating awareness of what we do and the value we bring to our organization. We do this by such things as participating in internal 'meet and greet' sessions with our clients, awarding small prizes to clients who find missing files, and hosting file room tours. (Sounds strange until you realize some of the file rooms are over 14,000 square feet and can hold 150,000 files). Records Management can definitely be fun!

I'm not sure I have too many repetitive tasks, other than the pure administrative duties that come along in any large company – bi-weekly progress reports, approving timesheets, collecting stats, budgeting – that sort of thing. The rest of the time I find my job is quite interesting and exciting, and most definitely challenging. But it is challenging in a good way. It's challenging because I'm stretching myself and my team to always take things one step further, to work with technology to automate and interface between systems so we increase our data integrity, make things easier for our clients, and free us up to work on even more exciting projects.

Some of the projects we have recently or are currently managing include investigating an Electronic Records Management system to replace our current file tracking system, planning new file rooms and populating them, proposing protection methods for some of our more critical records, working with a client group who want to capture all their records electronically, moving from paper-based subscriptions of well logs to an electronic access system, determining strategies for electronic records preservation, and providing an interface to our records systems so clients can check the status and location of a file right from their desk-top. We've even had to deal with the challenge of leaking pipes running through the

ceiling resulting in wet files and the need to implement disaster recovery plans to freeze-dry the records to inhibit mould!

A couple of times per year I also get involved in submitting changes to ensure our retention guide is current and is appropriate for client use, plus I'll get involved in assisting clients with organizing and protecting the information they're still responsible for. We've also had large divestitures requiring a dedicated team of records people over the course of months to locate, track, and transmit the records for sold properties.

Although Records Management as a profession has been around for many years and the principles of Records Management are well defined for hardcopy records, the advent of technology means I constantly have to learn what's new and how it might impact my organization at some point in time. For example, I've recently looked at RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) technologies for potential use on my files instead of barcodes. I've also read up on virtual email, where the messages sit on servers only for a short period of time and then disappear from the sender, receiver and server once read. Luckily I can't imagine that would be implemented any time soon by companies, but imagine the nightmare of trying to manage those 'records'.

In order to keep up with changes in the profession, I'm a member of a couple of professional organizations, ARMA – the Association of Records Managers and Administrators; and AIIM – the Enterprise Content Management Association. I find their journals invaluable, plus ARMA also has monthly information and lunch session which are great for learning about various topics and for networking. I'm also lucky enough to have attended several conferences through these organizations. It's typically through ARMA and AIIM that I become aware of new legislation and standards, both at the Canadian and International levels, related to records that I need to be aware of and/or familiar with so I can ensure I'm always working to best practices for my company. I also do a lot of research on the Web, in addition to taking advantage of a records management listserv for asking my peers for advice. Records Management is a dynamic field, and the need to stay current is paramount.