



Applying Archival Appraisal Concepts to Information Lifecycle Management

Information is the real currency of business today; without it, organizations cannot function. As the value of information transcends and exceeds the value of currencies, records and information management (RIM) professionals are poised to become the new chief financial officers. By integrating archival appraisal methods into their practice, RIM professionals can ensure their organizations are not bogged down with obsolete materials, have the best information, and get more value from it by using it for secondary purposes.

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There is much for records and information management (RIM) professionals to learn from their counterparts in archival administration. It is archivists' efforts to cull the 95%-98% of materials that are not of enduring value to get to their repositories' archival core that transcend their field. Identifying, analyzing, and selecting just those materials that fit the collecting scope are known as *archival appraisal*, or simply appraisal.

People traditionally think of appraisal as an expert assessing the market value of something of potential con-

siderable value, such as a diamond ring or a house. But, it happens in all facets of life; we are a culture of appraisers. Anytime we go to buy or sell something, we perform an appraisal at some level – whether it be measuring, assessing, and comparing brands of butter at the supermarket, shopping around for a car, or even clearing out the attic.

This last example – sifting through the accumulations of life to determine what can go away and what still has value and needs to be kept – is closest to the type of appraisal performed by archivists.

Building Blocks for Appraisal

Context is crucial to performing a sound appraisal. So, before appraisal can begin, the appraiser must first determine the material's "who, what, when, where, why, and how" to build the context for understanding the value and purpose of the information. In an archival setting, these questions are consolidated into a few foundational concepts, as follows.

Provenance is defined by the Society of American Archivists as "The origin or source of something." Provenance ties to appraisal as it authenticates the source and custodians, ensuring the veracity of the information. The term is often heard in auction houses and museums where artifacts are verified through their records of ownership and custodianship. *Provenance* answers the "who," "when," and "where."

As stated by Luciana Duranti in *Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science*, *provenance* also "leads us to evaluate records on the basis of the importance of the creator's mandate and functions, and fosters the use of a hierarchical method, a 'top-down' approach..."

Respect des fonds, literally "respecting the group," means that each group of records must be understood for what it is and not be conflated with other groups or subdivided. Each fond is a distinct group with its own distinct set(s) of records series and must be treated separately. *Respect des fonds* answers the "what."

Original order refers to the way in which the information was kept and used by its custodian. It aids in identifying information within a group, understanding decision-making and thought processes, and proving that the information is genuine. *Original order* answers the "how" and "why."

Using these conceptual building blocks to appraise

sets of information – determining what the information is, where it came from, how it was used, when it was created, who created it, and who benefits from it – enables RIM professionals to determine its value with respect to business needs and regulatory requirements and then to calculate how long it needs to be preserved before it starts to pose a risk.

In most instances, information's business value is exhausted before its legal value. Once both are exhausted, the information ceases to be useful to the organization and should then be appraised for permanent disposition – generally destroyed or transferred to the archives.

Archival appraisal concepts are readily transferrable to any environment where information is kept. Use the following steps.

Step 1: Identify the Fonds/Groups

The first step in appraising information is to understand the grouping of the set or series of information, or respect des fonds. In other words, determine the information's "what." The grouping into fonds is organic, representing how the business is organized and not how someone thinks it should be organized. It is not the role of RIM professionals to re-arrange information so it fits some other need, as this would disrespect the group.

Provenance and original order, with their traceable chain of custody, authenticate and verify the information within the fonds that is needed to perform appraisal.

The larger the organization, the greater the division of labor and the easier to see the different fonds and their records series. Ideally, the organization chart will match 1:1 to the fonds or at least be close to that ratio. Each fond corresponds to a distinct department or function, as shown in Table 1.

Fond/Function	Group/Department
Hire and Maintain Employees	Human resources, recruiting
Pay Employees	Payroll, benefits
Plan	Budget, executive leadership, steering committee, board of directors
Provide a Place to Work	Facilities, real estate
Ensure Employees Have What They Need to Perform Well	Procurement, IT, mail, training records/archives, library/research
Secure Assets	Security, legal, compliance
Track Profit and Loss	Accounting, accounts payable/accounts receivable, budget, investment, tax
Charity	Foundations, pro bono programs, outreach programs

Table 1: Relationship Between Fond/Function and Group/Department

The list of funds is somewhat flexible depending on the size and scope of the organization, but each fund needs to be at a high-enough level so it is easy to see the main functions/components of the whole organization.

Be mindful that some sub-groups may be embedded into another part of the business due to political and structural whims instead of with their logical group and, therefore, they will be out of synch with the fund in which they fit. For example, the chief operating officer often has a few distinct functional groups, such as human resources, security, and facilities.

Step 2: Identify Each Fond's Records Series and Sub-Series

With the funds identified, the next step is to understand the records series within each fund and their context with respect to the entire organization and within their functional area. This determines the information's "where, when, why, and how."

Since the fund identification effort made clear what the departments within a group do and the funds to which they belong, the series and sub-series within each fund will also be clear and logical. For example, as shown in Table 2, HR will typically have series for recruitment,

narrow buckets mired in item-level detail, which can result in information being overlooked – as can be the case with schedules created at the sub-series level.

Deciding at what level to create retention schedules is subjective and should be based on the breadth and complexity of the organization. Large, complex organizations are better suited to working at the series level, while smaller, simpler businesses could potentially develop schedules at the funds/group level.

Develop the schedule at the level of detail (i.e., fond/group, series, sub-series) that it will be the most useful and operable by the offices responsible for the information. The important thing is to be able to match records series to a distinct functional group that has ownership of them, so the same group has responsibility for both maintaining the series and managing the information through its disposition.

Determining the "who, what, when, where, why, and how" of each series will not only help in the primary goal of thinning the information volume, it may provide other opportunities. For example, it will be easier to see the types and flows of information and identify what information has value for reuse in other areas, such as for knowledge management.

Fond/Function	Group/Department	Records Series	Records Sub-series
Hire and Maintain Employees	Human resources, recruiting	Recruitment	Training
		New Hires/Employees	Evaluations
		Terminations	Compensation

Table 2: The Relationships Between a Fond/Function and Its Records Series and Sub-series

new hires/employees, and terminations. There also may be sub-series for training, evaluations, and compensation if these are not managed by separate and distinct departments within the HR group.

The complexity of the series level depends on business practices as well as the organization's legal/regulatory requirements. Large and multilayered organizations generally require a greater analysis of groups and sub-groups, each with its own series and sub-series, while smaller and simpler organizations are more readily suited to the fund more closely matching the CEO example given above with its few distinct functional groups, such as human resources, security, and facilities.

Establishing Retention

Retention rules can be established at the series level. This will result in neither overly broad buckets, which can become complicated and difficult to use – as can be the case with schedules created at the funds level – nor very

Step 3: Determine the Value for Each Series

Information can possess an array of values, and these values are not mutually exclusive. For organizations, all business records fit under the "administrative" value category, which is often further subdivided into "operational," "legal," "financial," and "historical." These are more nuanced subsets which often possess specific retention and disposition requirements set by regulatory bodies.

Defining Appraisal Values

According to Maygene Daniels, in the 1984 National Archives and Records Administration Glossary, the main appraisal values are administrative, intrinsic, research, and evidential, as explained below.

Administrative value is the value of records for the ongoing business or its successor in function (e.g., articles of incorporation, payroll records, project files, leases).

Intrinsic value refers to the qualities and characteristics of records in their original form (e.g., Abraham Lincoln's

own handwritten Gettysburg Address).

Information with intrinsic value in most organizations will generally be in the form of wet signature agreements, diplomas, and certificates. Depending on the business, there are other instances where the physical state of an item itself has informational value, such as a design firm's carpet and tile samples. Intrinsic value adds a dimension of knowledge that is necessary to understand the information/object. Historic and archival records are a subset of this value.

Research value is related to information on persons, places, subjects, and things other than the operation of the organization that created them (e.g., subject files, lab notebooks).

Research value is the value beyond the information's primary intent for existence, giving it a secondary value. Knowledge management comes into play here, which will affect the weight of the research value in an appraisal.

An organization that looks at its information from an appraisal perspective will see its inherent value and be able to make the most from it.

Evidential value refers to the documentation of the operations and activities of the organization.

Weighting Appraisal Values

Each of these values is considered independently, subjectively weighted, and then combined to establish the appraisal. There is no prescribed formula, but weighting these values is not as hard as it sounds. Just like people depend on the context of the materials found in the archaeological digs of their attics and basements to determine their value, RIM professionals depend on understanding the fonds and records series in their organizations and how they fit together to determine business information's value.

Nearly all corporate organizations use administrative and evidential value with risk analysis to produce their records retention schedules. They basically ask themselves, "What do we need to memorialize our decisions, stay out of trouble with regulators, keep off the front pages of newspapers, and make a profit?"

There's not much appraisal in this approach since it focuses more on risk than value. Appraisal emphasizes value and use. It looks at both the negative (risk and loss), as well as the positive (increased productivity and profits), and weighs it all in a big picture way to make the organization better.

Equally considering all information values to determine the correct retention for each records series is the nexus of appraisal. This is akin to the archives' collection policy,

which clearly states what the repository seeks to acquire – what is to be kept and how it should be maintained and made available – as well as what it does not want – what is not to be kept at all and what is to be kept for only a defined period of time and then disposed.

The clarity and transparency of the collection policy make the archives appropriately responsible for what it has, what it does not want, and how and when it can dispose of unwanted materials. RIM professionals can use this same approach, applying archival appraisal to corporate information.

Step 4: Incorporate Appraisal Analysis into Policy

The culmination of the values analysis sets the appraisal, which is then embedded into retention policy. Just stating what needs to be retained and for how long is simply not enough; the value of the information has to be

indicated, as well as the context for how the information is valuable to the organization. Explicitly documenting the value clarifies the purpose of the information.

Embedding the value analysis into the retention policy transforms the schedule into a corporate collection policy. It then does double duty by explaining what needs to be retained and for how long due to its value, as well as explaining what to destroy and when to destroy it.

This bakes the appraisal process into the retention schedule at the start, bringing transparency to the retention and disposition policy decisions and eliminating the need to make the same decisions over and over. When there are changes to the retention schedules, though, information may need to be reappraised in light of the policy update.

Value Gain from Appraisal

Archival appraisal is a methodology that can and should be applied in more than just the archival setting. An organization that looks at its information from an appraisal perspective will see its inherent value and be able to make the most from it.

For more information on appraisal, visit the Society of American Archivists online bookstore (<https://saa.archivists.org/store/>) or reach out to a nearby archive or historical society. **END**

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