

## Viewing RIM from

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# THE OTHER END OF THE TELESCOPE

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Alison North, FAI, FIRMS

"O wad some Power the giftie gie us  
To see oursels as ithers see us!  
It wad frae mony a blunder free us..."

The opening quotation from a poem by my Scottish countryman Rabbie Burns, who wrote it on seeing a louse on a lady's hat in church, wishes that some greater power would allow us to understand how other people see us to free us from making mistakes. This is fairly apt, as this article attempts to explain how our colleagues in other functional areas view records and information management (RIM) and our attempts to get them to understand what we believe in and want them to be responsible for.

## Persistence Is Not Enough

Our optimism always does us credit. As RIM professionals, we view the world of information as open and inviting; we have huge goals and objectives to manage our organization's information in an effective and cost-neutral way. No matter how many times we get knocked back, we return with the same enthusiasm and methods and try again, even when those methods have not worked.

We are believers. Few of us fall by the wayside even though we never quite succeed in delivering what we

know the organization needs. Why are we so tenacious? What makes us such "true believers" in the power and necessity of RIM? Are we right, and, if so, why do relatively few employees understand? I have always admired our drive to deliver RIM, but there are times when we need to realize that stubbornly doing the same thing time and again will never get us a successful outcome.

I once watched a baby building a tower with similar-sized blocks, and every time, the tower collapsed when block five was put on the top. The first few times the baby laughed, but after three or four attempts, he began to realize it was not a laughing matter. He paused, looked around, and spied different-sized blocks lying behind him. He then experimented a few times, piling the different sizes on each other until, finally, the tower held. He had learned very quickly that persisting in doing the same thing over and over again was not going to build the tower, so he changed the game.

## It's Time for a Game Changer

Now is the time for RIM pro-



professionals to consider our tenacity, our persistence to follow a course of action that has not overcome the existing business environment or others' lack of interest in our attempts to implement our Generally Accepted Recordkeeping Principles (Principles), standards, and practices. We need to stop pushing the same old stuff on our colleagues and begin igniting innovation in the profession.

The exciting technology changes that are forcing organizations to reorganize their businesses mean we RIM professionals need to reorganize, too. We must learn to thrive in these times of uncertainty, opening ourselves up to different ways for managing and delivering information.

This reorganization will require redefining our function and tools and reconfiguring some of what we have been doing. Our Principles are sound, but the explanation underpinning them is not clear enough for our colleagues to understand; indeed, even some RIM professionals struggle to understand them.

We also need to clarify our purpose; just what do we deliver to the world, and how does the world benefit by our work? We need a game plan.

### **We Need to Establish Our Identity**

Our first problem is that our profession does not have a neat and easily understood label like most professions do. We all know what doctors do and what their overarching profession is, for example, even if we don't understand their specializations. In contrast, RIM professionals don't have an overarching profession. Our colleagues, for the most part, have no idea what we do or why.

They may give us plaudits when we find lost information they need, and they may even know that what we do is connected to legal, IT, security, privacy, archives, or compliance, depending on the sector the business is in and the risk associated with the products and services the organization delivers. But, they don't

know what it is that we do. There are several reasons for our profession being misunderstood.

#### *We're a Profession Divided*

We have divided our profession along the lines of our specializations, such as privacy officer or data controller. We are not seen first as *information* professionals and second as specialists; we are fragmented among almost as many job titles as there are organizations. This puts us at a disadvantage when trying to explain who we are, what we do, and what we need others in the business to do.

## **We must learn to thrive in these times of uncertainty, opening ourselves up to different ways for managing and delivering information.**

#### *We Have Evolving Roles*

In 2011, Gartner published "CIO Alert: The Need for Information Professionals," in which authors Debra Logan and Regina Casonato highlighted that an "information professional" will not have just one type of role or skill set, but will, in fact, have many specializations. Information professionals today possess a variety of skills, depending on the requirements of the organizations employing them and the roles given them. Their job titles usually reflect the organization's requirements.

Their roles may change frequently because they have such a wide variety of skills and because business risks change. RIM professionals reflect those changes and adapt accord-

ingly. One day we may be a records assistant and the next day a privacy and protection officer. We like these changes and jump gleefully on the next bandwagon hoping that it will finally get the people in our organization on board, too. Look at how we forged ahead into information governance (IG) – mea culpa – believing that because we think a senior person should be accountable for the information program, one would be! But IG means different things in different countries, sectors, and professions, so using that term produces even more confusion.

#### *Our Role Is Seen as Intrusive*

Another issue for RIM is that what we do usually impacts our colleagues' work, and they don't always accept this. They may feel that we are peering over their shoulders to assess the value of their information or ensure that they save the document in the correct folder, which they feel to be intrusive and unnecessary.

#### *RIM Overlaps Other Functions*

The fourth area of confusion is outside of our control: other professions undertaking work we consider part of the RIM portfolio.

Managing information retention, which is usually considered a prime objective of our work, is a good example of this. In the frequent e-discovery/e-disclosure seminars I attend, there invariably is a presentation on information retention, and in-house counsel often are unaware that RIM professionals have been handling records retention for decades. The legal folks frequently confuse the business with records-related requirements and policies that have different goals than ours.

I have no real issue with lawyers handling retention; I have tried often enough to engage with them on this subject. But, it does cause confusion with staff and provides an opportunity for staff to avoid doing any records-related work.

But it is more worrying than that. An organization with confused

people is neither productive nor likely to manage its information effectively. Worse, when information isn't shared, correct, or available, lives can end.

In the U.K., we have only to look at the circumstances surrounding the well-known death of the young child Victoria Climbié to see the potential consequences of poor information gathering and sharing. An inquiry into her 2000 death showed that in the last months of her life, she was brought to the attention of authorities who could have intervened to stop her abuse – including hospitals, social services, child protection services, and police. The inquiry report said that although each of these agencies had “bits of information” about her injuries, they were “never brought together.”

In the United States, a lengthy investigation into the 2010 rupture of the San Bruno pipeline that took eight lives revealed that pipeline owner Pacific Gas & Electric did not have records to identify with any certainty what exactly it had running underground.

## *Our Value Is Unrecognized*

Many would argue that it's not just people that cause us to fail, but also reduced budgets, lack of management support, or perhaps a change in top leadership. Yes, all these factors can cause us to falter, but consider the point of view of the business:

- Why spend money on something that doesn't deliver the products and services?
- Why support something that doesn't help achieve the corporate goals?
- Why include RIM in organizational strategy when it looks as if technology is going to solve all the information-related challenges the business may have – and bring in revenue?

As a profession that does not attract many younger folks, RIM looks a little old and outdated. In truth, the senior people in your organization

most likely believe that everything you do that brings value to the business could be divided among the rest of the staff and accomplished with new technology underpinning it. Sadly, if every RIM person walked off the job, few businesses would notice until something went wrong, and even then, they may not call us back to fix it.

## *We Need to Change Our Approach*

I hope by now you're all annoyed with me and raging at the print. Go

# Is RIM dead? No, but I believe it is on life support, and we are trying to revive it using the same approach we've always used...

ahead, but while you're feeling this anger, answer the bulleted questions above. If you can't answer them in *your* organization's language in a way *your* colleagues can understand, there is no reason for RIM there at all.

Is RIM dead? No, but I believe it is on life support, and we are trying to revive it using the same approach we've always used: call it something new, develop tools based on our previous practices, and educate staff. It's not working.

The view from the other end of the telescope – from the business's perspective – shows RIM and IG fading into the far distance. This opinion is backed up by the ARMA International/Forrester Research key trends and challenges survey reported in the March/April 2017

issue of this magazine. The statistic that only 6.8% lines of business have RIM programs reporting into them supports my fear that we are totally disconnected from the actual work that our organizations do.

Because information is embedded in the processes that the lines of business use, it makes sense that our Principles should be embedded there also. Isolating IG from corporate governance and process governance is a big mistake. From the point of view of the business, our explanation of the purpose for IG and RIM is already represented within, for example, quality management systems, IT infrastructure, and accounting reporting. So how do we turn around this state of affairs?

## *We Need to Tweak the Principles*

I said earlier that our Principles, with a little re-draft into business purpose and language, are sound. But let's view them from the other end of that telescope.

## *Accountability*

This Principle says we want a senior executive to oversee the IG program and delegate responsibility for RIM to the appropriate individuals. Why? Senior people believe that they've done this already by employing you. They don't isolate information from the work they govern; they consider that they already govern the information via the systems they have in place. They are most likely correct except, perhaps, in two areas: privacy, which is sometimes confused with security, and retention, or archiving, as the business may understand it. You may be given full support for the retention program, but it's of no use if the business lines don't “buy into it.”

We need to do more work around getting staff members to be responsible for managing their information, explaining why they need to do it. This mandate does stem from the top, but this is done by example. It's not necessarily accomplished

by delivering new policies, and it's definitely not accomplished by delegating or by providing isolated IG and RIM education. Responsibility must be embedded in the business culture. If everyone around you is being responsible, you will be, too – and that extends to managing your information.

#### *Transparency*

Our definition of the Principle of Transparency talks about transparent processes, policies, and procedures. In the business, it's about transparency of information to be shared with the right people. Businesses aren't always good at that. It would help if this Principle also focused on sharing information and RIM promoted a better way of communicating and sharing all information, whether it is verbal, digital, or analog.

#### *Integrity*

There is no doubt that ensuring the authenticity and reliability of information, as stated in the Principle of Integrity, is a really good reason to manage our information. Let's bring this Principle into the future, though, and talk about the need to provide accurate information for combatting terrorism, eliminating fake news, and developing life-saving products. There is an endless list of good stuff that information with integrity brings to a business. We just need to explain this and how RIM and IG help to achieve trust.

#### *Protection*

In today's cyber-attacking world, the business sees protecting information as an IT responsibility, not a RIM function. This Principle needs to make it clearer that protection also relates to the privacy of individuals and their personal information. The business often forgets this so we need to make sure that the business understands this aspect, too, even if there are no local regulations around protecting personal information. A business that takes care of its staff

and customers' personal data is one that builds trust and loyalty, which also has a positive effect on revenue.

#### *Compliance*

With the Principle of Compliance, we continue to pre-suppose that an organization must have a compliant IG program, rather than focus on how RIM can have a positive effect on compliance across the whole business. Expanding the focus of the Principle to emphasize the positive effect of RIM on compliance

## **The Principle of Availability should reference our need to be more proactive about connecting fragmented content that is spread across information platforms...**

provides an opportunity for RIM professionals to deliver cash benefits to the business, mitigate risk, and enhance safety, especially if the business is highly regulated.

#### *Availability*

RIM has little control over availability of the organization's business information because it is owned, generally, by the business lines and is very often in locked silos. Records may come to us via the retention program, if there is one, or by the archiving process, but less and less digital data is being moved to RIM control, so access is denied and availability is poor.

The Principle of Availability should reference our need to be more proactive about connecting frag-

mented content that is spread across information platforms, including mobile devices and cloud-based services, and providing access to those who need it, while also protecting corporate intellectual property and personal data. Accomplishing this will provide a more collaborative environment for staff to work in and benefit the business.

#### *Retention*

There is definitely room for improvement in the Principle of Retention, as it should include implementing new technology for better, more automated information delivery. We need to turn our attention to the analytical tools and trust technology, like blockchain, to help us build a more robust retention program for the future, one that is automated and captures all the relevant information that needs to be retained or preserved. We are highly skilled to complete this work, but we must start now.

#### *Disposition*

The Principle of Disposition means so much to RIM professionals, but the term *disposition* is not always understood by laymen. They may believe we are talking about information disposal, when, in fact, we may be talking about archiving digital and paper information for a specified time.

Disposal of digital data has slipped down the business agenda in favor of keeping everything, as it may have some value to the business. This Principle should endorse the retention of all digital data as allowed by law and work with the business to ensure that it is accurate, available when needed, connected and shared to reduce disasters, and digitally preserved as necessary.

To meet requirements around the disposal of personal information in some countries, such as the United Kingdom and in most European countries, we need to develop robust methods for finding and destroying or anonymizing digital data. Work-



ing with our digital preservation colleagues, we can have valuable input and achieve this business goal.

## We Need to Add a Principle

There is one other principle our profession must have, and while we talk about it for our colleagues, we don't often discuss it for ourselves: The Principle of Education.

The information world has exploded, and we need to be on top of all things related to this world. To do this, we must continually learn and develop our skills. Our profession is low key and oft-times invisible, but that is no excuse for us to hide

in a corner and forget the need for advancement.

Many of the skills we need are not obviously related to RIM, so we need to identify and develop education and training that helps us:

- Understand business and its needs and define our purpose in business terms
- Learn about new technology and its products and future development
- Be aware of customers' and citizens' desires

This latter group, customers and citizens, is where all businesses are focussing their efforts right now.

As citizens, as well as RIM professionals, we are better enabled on the technology front than most of our employers. Let's blend our citizen knowledge with our RIM knowledge and develop better IG and RIM practices for business.

## It's Time to Move Forward

I haven't dwelt on how we can clarify our purpose here because I believe we should all figure that one out for ourselves and because there is so much more that could be written here to help with that. But this is an article, not a book, so forgive me if I have started something that I haven't finished – it's a big subject. ARMA International is well placed to move forward and lead our profession forward with big changes. I hope it does. **E**



**About the Author:** Alison North, FAI, FIRMS, is CEO of AN Information Ltd. and chairman and CEO of Friends of Charing Cross Hospital. An information professional since 1972 and a long-time independent management consultant, she brings innovation and positive transformation to business, clarity and motivation to professionals, and help to those starting out or changing careers. The author and frequent speaker says she is driven to help governments, charities, and businesses deliver integrity and transparency through the safe and secure management of information and to persuade naysayers that profit will be made when information is traceable, verifiable, and complete. For her many accomplishments in the information world, North was named a Fellow of the Information and Records Management Society (FIRMS) in 2010 and a Fellow of ARMA International (FAI) in 2016. North can be contacted at [anorth@aninformation.co.uk](mailto:anorth@aninformation.co.uk).

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