

What Is Past Is Prologue

What History Reveals About the Future of RIM



How the records and information management (RIM) profession has responded to the evolving business environment over the past 75 years – including the epochal change introduced by digital information – provides a valuable pattern for how it can continue to be relevant into the foreseeable future.

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At the northeast corner of the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C., there sits a marble statue, *The Future*, designed by sculptor Robert Aitken in 1935. The phrase inscribed on its base, though, seems dichotomous if not contradictory: “What is past is prologue.” Taken from William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, which was written ca. 1610, the phrase may be understood today to mean that history sets the context for the present and informs the future; the experience of the past is a harbinger of what is to come.

Though any serious study of history reveals that it does not repeat itself, similar patterns do recur. In the context of business recordkeeping and the professional practice of records and information management (RIM), this article identifies past patterns and what they portend for the future of the profession.

From Paper to E-records

When I began my career in 1969, RIM was about exercising direct custody over physical records in file rooms and records centers. The only available technology was microfilm. The underlying principles and practices of the discipline were, by today’s standards, relatively simple, even primitive.

Unbeknownst to me (a young, eager, and inexperienced professional), my chosen field was on the cusp of change. Within a few short years, business records were no longer only physical objects that could be touched by the hand and read by the human eye; they included electronic records.

These new records possessed characteristics never seen in the paper world: a much shorter life expectancy but greater strategic value, rates of growth, retention challenges, accessibility, regulatory compliance challenges, litigation risks, consequences of loss, and preservation challenges.

As I write this in the twilight of my career, organizational recordkeeping is in the latter stages of a

long transition from visible media to computer-based recordkeeping. Despite the length of time it is taking, this transition has been truly epochal. This article is about the evolution of RIM that has led to today’s challenges and opportunities – and what they mean for the future of RIM.

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The ‘Paperless Office’

In 1975 a *Business Week* article predicted that the “paperless office” would “soon” become a reality. This didn’t happen – primarily because the printers attached to nearly all system configurations *facilitated*, rather than *replaced*, paper. In fact, the October 8, 2008, *Economist* article “Not dead, just resting,” says that from 1980–2000, the global consumption of office paper more than doubled.

So, for decades the term “paperless office” was greeted with ridicule by business managers and the RIM community alike. “The office will be paperless when the bathroom is paperless” was a common if somewhat crude response to the idea.

The naysayers were wrong, though; the (virtually) paperless office has just taken longer than expected to become a reality. The tipping point in this paradigm shift was reached around 2000, when the consumption of office paper leveled off and began to decrease for the first time ever. Two decades after the 1980s advent of personal computers, technology *finally* began to replace more paper than it created. Now, virtually all business records are born digital, live digital (never printed), and die digital.

RIM Reinvented

How have RIM professionals responded to the epochal shift to (virtually) all-digital content? Beginning in the late 1980s, they transitioned gradually from focusing on direct control over paper records to being largely concerned with policy planning, compliance monitoring, and other aspects of information governance (IG) across all media types, but especially on the predominant one – digital.

Again, the naysayers, who said there wasn’t enough technical talent among RIM professionals to make a successful transition from physical to digital RIM, were wrong. Today, the RIM discipline is compliance-driven, supported by sophisticated technology tools, and highly dynamic; its challenges are being met by the bright and talented people who enter the profession every day.

A Place at ‘the Table’

The paradigm shift to electronic records has been extremely favorable for RIM. Far from the half-century-old perception of RIM playing an insignificant role in organizational success, it is frequently perceived today as *the* crucial factor in achieving business objectives. Along with this enhanced role for RIM professionals comes a much higher level of difficulty in managing digital objects, by orders of magnitude, than in managing physical ones.

Because the content is more valuable, the challenges and rewards are also greater. No longer relegated to the dreary backwaters of facilities management, RIM professionals are given a place at the table alongside other key stakeholders in organizations where information is valued as a strategic business asset.

Today’s RIM Challenges

The recognition of RIM professionals as an important IG stakeholder is critical, as it takes a collaborative effort among all stakeholders

to meet today's evolving challenges, which are described below.

Improving Accessibility

Though the time required to retrieve electronic information is seconds, rather than the minutes to days required to retrieve paper, the era of "retrieval Utopia" has not yet arrived for most organizations. Electronic content can be lost just as easily as paper can be. One thing stands in the way of optimized information access across the enterprise: semantic inconsistency. Studies have demonstrated that employees can find information much faster when navigating aptly named categories than when navigating content that is not organized in a logical schema, which RIM professionals refer to as file plans, document classification schemes, or taxonomies.

A *taxonomy*, defined by ARMA International as "A collection of controlled vocabulary terms used to describe an organization's information components," is critically important to precisely retrieving *unstructured* content – information not contained within the rows and columns of databases – which generally constitutes a large percentage of most organization's information assets.

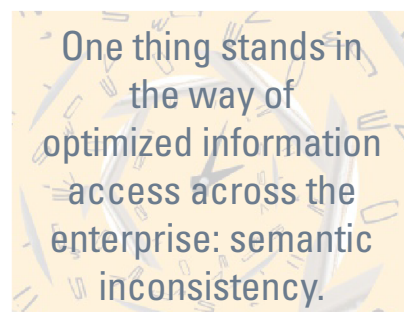
With no taxonomy to follow, content creators arbitrarily assign file names, resulting in highly fragmented recordkeeping systems in which precise retrieval cannot be realized. Even in advanced technology environments utilizing robust search engines, methodologies for identifying and classifying content can still contribute materially to system performance in precisely retrieving content. RIM's mission is to make precise and timely retrieval the rule rather than the exception so recordkeeping systems effectively support the organization's business objectives.

Ensuring Compliance

Although deregulation has been a goal of most U.S. presidential administrations since Jimmy Carter signed the Paperwork Reduction

Act into law in 1980, new regulatory mandates proliferate unabated. While regulatory compliance has always been a predominant focus for IM, the passage of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 made it even more so.

Today, U.S. organizations are in the world's most heavily regulated information environment, with tens



of thousands of laws and regulations affecting business recordkeeping. Most large organizations need to engage RIM experts to research these laws and regulations to ensure compliance with them.

The goal of compliance can be simply stated: to avoid the appearance of impropriety; that is, to appear beyond reproach. There is really only one way to do this: by preserving complete and accurate records that clearly show the organization has followed – in letter and spirit – all the stipulated requirements of the laws, regulations, policies, and procedures to which it is subject. These records must be found to be trustworthy; that is, they have not been falsified in pursuit of some nefarious purpose.

The imperative of legal and regulatory compliance has been very favorable for RIM professionals, whose expertise is critical to achieving a desired level of compliance. Their goal should be to ensure that their organization's information assets can meet the tests of *authenticity* (their origin, reliability, trustworthiness, and correctness are established), *integrity* (they have a reasonable guarantee of authenticity and reliability), and *reliability* (they are trustworthy over time).

Devising Effective Retention/Disposition Strategies

Records *retention*, which ARMA International defines as maintaining information assets for an appropriate time, per the organization's legal, regulatory, fiscal, operational, and historical requirements, has been a mainstay of RIM professional practice since the 1950s. The same is true of records *disposition*, which is the systematic disposal of business records under approved management policies.

Both retention and disposition will remain core RIM practices for the foreseeable future – there is simply no good alternative. When an organization feels compelled to do something about its aging records, it has only three choices:

1. Keep everything forever – Despite drastic reductions in computer storage costs, this is simply untenable as a business practice. The reason is that as records age, they cease to be an asset to the business and become a liability.
2. Grant employees the authority to destroy records at their discretion – This option is untenable from a legal perspective because arbitrary decisions to destroy records selectively are difficult to defend.
3. Destroy useless records systematically as mandated by approved retention rules, and hold departments and employees accountable for complying fully with these rules.

The last option has been – and will remain – best professional practice in RIM. Therefore, the supreme challenge of RIM practitioners will remain: to devise practical and workable strategies for effectively applying retention rules and disposition practices in the advanced recordkeeping environments of today and tomorrow.

Mitigating E-discovery Risks

In litigation, it's not the records that have been discarded that create the most legal problems, *it's those that*

remain. Attorneys can more easily defend the *absence* of documents that have been systematically destroyed under an established retention policy than they can defend existing records' *content*.

This reality means an organization's records retention and disposition practices must meet the standard of "defensible disposition": fully compliant with applicable laws and regulations, carried out in the normal course of business, and applied consistently and in "good faith" (i.e., be reasonable for the circumstances and not motivated to conceal incriminating or unfavorable evidence or information).

The need to mitigate the risks associated with litigation and e-discovery will remain at the forefront of RIM practice for the foreseeable future. This is the most compelling reason why organizations must embrace RIM and its capabilities.

Preserving Mission-critical E-records

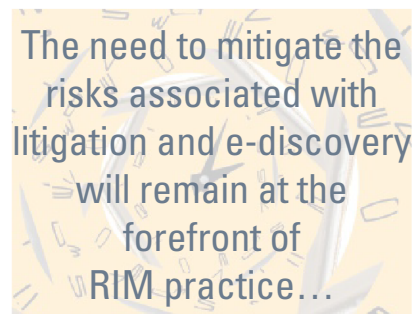
On the morning of September 11, 2001, much of New York City's World Trade Center complex was destroyed in a matter of hours. Catastrophic on many levels, it also was the largest records-related disaster in U.S. history; the only paper records that survived were those taken down the stairwells in briefcases.

In contrast, only a few World Trade Center companies required help with mainframe recovery. The greatest challenge was restoring mid-range systems, servers, and connectivity to computer networks and desktops. Data losses were mainly confined to current information, most of which could be reconstructed, albeit at considerable cost and inconvenience.

For most organizations, to lose all paper records would be inconvenient, but to lose all electronic records would likely put them out of business. It is RIM's job to identify where the organization's mission-critical records' risks and vulnerabilities are greatest and to mitigate them.

Extending RIM Programs Globally

Fresh out of college I never imagined one day being involved in the globalization of RIM professional practice. But when serving on ARMA International's Board of Directors during the late 1980s, I took a colleague's advice to begin consulting with multinational companies that



soon would be looking to extend retention rules and policies to their international operations.

Our company was, as far as I am aware, the first to begin researching records retention and other business recordkeeping laws and regulations around the world. Today, many firms perform these services because the challenges of unmanaged or under-managed records are ubiquitous, crossing borders and oceans. So, any multinational company with a management philosophy based on provincial thinking will find it wholly inadequate.

Protecting Personal Information, Privacy

Prior to 1995, information privacy was scarcely on RIM practitioners' radar screen. In that year, though, the European Union (EU) issued its Directive on Data Protection (95/46/EC), and compliance rose to the top of every EU practitioner's agenda. At first, it appeared the issue would be largely confined to Europe, but when I spoke at the European Commission Conference on Electronic Records in Brussels in 1997, it became clear to me that the EU's goal was to advance its privacy model globally.

Many countries soon began

incorporating provisions into their laws and regulations mandating the destruction of various classes of personally identifiable information after a specified time. This meant multinational companies had to revise their records retention policies and practices, creating a very favorable environment for RIM professionals. Since then, privacy concerns have only increased and become more complex, making this a persistent driver for RIM's evolving professional practice.

Preserving Digital Information

In 1979, I was asked to determine what to do with the old records of the Calumet and Hecla Copper Company (C&H), the world's foremost copper mining concern during the nineteenth century. Since 1968, when the company's mines in Michigan's Upper Peninsula closed, the records had languished in abandoned offices and storage sheds. I inventoried and appraised the records and then made disposition decisions. Some of the records were extremely valuable; most were given to Michigan Tech University, and some went to the Smithsonian Institution.

The point is that these important paper records were preserved by *accident* rather than *design*; had they been electronic, they would have been lost to history. Preserving electronic records requires following carefully planned preservation practices that are implemented by computer specialists. It is the task of RIM specialists to work with IT and other stakeholders to ensure the preservation of electronic records that warrant such action.

RIM and IG

Most large organizations have entrusted the business of managing information assets to at least a half dozen distinct disciplines who work in "silos," including RIM, IT, privacy, security, legal, risk and compliance, and others.

The realization in recent years that this traditional infrastructure is

inadequate to meet current information challenges has given rise to the interdisciplinary approach of IG, with its focus on satisfying information compliance requirements, managing information risks, and optimizing information value for business advantage.

RIM as a professional practice needs IG if it is to secure its future as an IM discipline. With RIM as a key subspecialty under the IG practice model, RIM practitioners will be better able to shape policy alongside their colleagues from other stakeholder groups. This will put them at the forefront of issues like how to implement defensible destruction in advanced technology platforms and content repositories, as well as many other areas central to RIM's future.

RIM's Remarkable Longevity

An often-overlooked aspect of RIM is its remarkable staying power; its demise often has been wrongly predicted. When compelled to reinvent its professional practices to

meet the unprecedented challenges of electronic recordkeeping, RIM did so. It persisted through the early 1990s when document management and knowledge management took the country by storm before fading away and again when enterprise content management did the same. RIM will live on even if IG is superseded by some other highly touted approach to managing information.

RIM's Best Days Are Ahead

RIM has existed for some 75 years, but the best time to practice it is now. The challenges and opportunities have never been greater and they will only increase.

And so, the lessons of history are these:

1. RIM will be needed as long as organizations:
 - Create records and need to find them
 - Need to demonstrate compliance with laws and regulations
 - Need to mitigate the risks associated with litigation and e-discovery

- Must prevent the loss of mission-critical data
- Want to discard information that is useless and preserve what is needed

2. If RIM is to continue to optimize the value and minimize the risks of information in the organizations of the future, it must reinvent itself and its professional practices yet again. And it will. **E**



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