Challenges in Moving From Paper to Electronic Records

I think one of the biggest challenges facing records managers as they move from storing and retrieving paper-based records to electronic records is they will have to play a bigger role now than they traditionally have. Tough and Moss (2003) argue that records managements have typically been left out of the design and implement phases of the systems they are using for paper records and this appears to be happening again with electronic records. IT professionals and Electronic Document Management (ECM) Vendors are creating systems that automatically index each record individually, similar to how the World Wide Web works, which require powerful searching algorithms and removes context that would have with a traditional filing system (Tough and Moss, 2003). Forbes-Pitt (2006) notes that because machines are unable to learn they cannot consider the importance of "context dependency" which highlights why vendors might opt to index documents as "discrete units" (Tough and Moss, 2003). I see two problems with this approach with leave records managers out of the loop. The first is you have people whom are not information professionals performing tasks and making decisions that really require one to be in the fold. Secondly they are not including the people that would be using the system the most when creating it which are the records managers.

Another challenge I foresee is some records managers having difficulty learning new software and technology needed to store and retrieve information as the field expands into electronic records. Bridges (35, 2007) goes as far as to say that the records manager "must" be knowable of electronic storage environments to do their jobs effectively which I think may be too hard of a swing in one direction. In my opinion this line of thinking subjugates experience below technical prowess, or proficiency, which leads to situations noted above where IT professionals design records management systems. Tough and Moss (2003) do seem to imply

there is a chasm between IT professionals and records managers which I think is unfortunate given how well their skills would seem to marry with one another. Bridges (2007) also pointed something out which I had not considered but made a lot of sense once I read it which is that the records manager would probably be chosen as the person to train staff on how to use the ECM software. It could be a very daunting task for someone unfamiliar, or even uncomfortable, with technology to teach new users. Even for someone very technologically proficient given how rapidly things are changed there has not been any established best practices for someone to lean on (Johare, 2007). Reading through Emery (2007) we see the number of vendors rushing in, almost, to try and figure this out so they can peddle their wares so things are very much in flux. Even within the discipline itself there does not appear to be a whole lot of agreement on how to proceed. Johare (2007), for example, looks worldwide in her article at what other records managers are doing to try and get a sense of what seems to work.

Lastly I think having staff buy-in into the records management program will be a stumbling block for many records managers moving forward. As we learned in class for a records management program to be successful everyone in the company has to be on board. If not we could see incidences of the program being undermined by staff simply not participating because they do not feel it is important or rebelling because they are frightened by change. If this is a problem for paper based records management programs I think it could be worse for electronic records as some people are distrustful or unaccustomed with anything technological. One of the first things Kaczmarek (2006) notes she did when helping to establish the Strategic Information Management Services (SIMS) records management program for electronic and digital records at the university she worked for is try to involve as many staff members as possible. When it comes to electronic records people may feel, or even be fearful, that their

privacy is being violated as information is being retrieved from their work computers for storage. Kaczmarek (2006) suggests that being upfront and laying ones cards on the table about what the program is gives concerned individuals not only gives them a chance to learn but also ask questions and participate. Bridge's (34, 2007) writes that records management is "everyone's responsibility" and I almost get the impression that the suggestion or implication from this article is that being a team leader is a role record managers need to embrace rather than simply doing.

Similarities and Differences between Paper and Electronic Records

I think the similarities between paper and electronic records far outweigh the differences. For example records will need to be retrievable for reference, stored for prescribed lengths of time, and destroyed appropriately regardless of the format they take. The general sense I get from researching for this essay is that the theoretical unpinning's and principals of traditional storage and retrieval methods still apply to electronic records even if the method has changed. I did not see this suggested by anyone but the idea that the field has to move rapidly away from using what has traditionally worked so well because of a change from analog to digital formats seems a little short-sighted. I think the key difference comes from both the Tough and Moss (2003) and Forbes-Pitt (2006) in that the way we conceptualise file systems for paper records versus electronic records is going to change. Forbes-Pitt (2006) examines using metadata as a wrapper extensively as a way of almost cushioning against how records would be automatically indexed which I think highlights either a shift in focus or thinking about records management. I also think that preservation is a big difference between the two approaches as paper will last several years with proper care whereas digital information has a shorter life than those creating it (Stewart, 2012). The solution here would be to make backups and transfers on regular intervals but such methods do degrade the data over time (Stewart, 2012).

How can technology assist records managers?

One way I can think of technology assisting records manager is with user accessibility and retrieval. I think a good example would be the City of Toronto Archives (2014) online search feature which allows users to view images without having to travel to their location. Part of the reason why I think this is an example of how to use technology right is that users are able to view the filing systems used by the Archive to navigate through the fond to item level to get a better idea of the context which accompanies this material (City of Toronto Archives, 2014). This approach is more akin to that proposed by Forbes-Pitt (2006) as items are tied together across multiple metadata rather than on a single thread, as a discrete unit, which Tough and Moss (2003) were critical of. I also think technology can help records managers create a system that requires little in the way of constant tweaking or maintenance as discussed by Emery (2007). Emery (2007) writes that Legacy software and systems are called that, not because they have permanent preservation in mind but rather, because they will survive staff and management turnover. I think this can be helpful for a variety of reasons but, specifically for records managers, joining or leaving organizations as they do not have to try and reinvent the wheel each time they get a new job. I think that it is also good for the records as it creates consistency over those years as companies are not over-hauling their records management programs every few years. Lastly I think developments in both the speed and storage capacities of hard drives will reap benefits for records managers, from a strategy perspective, moving forward. Although this sounds like a technological solution I would suggest that records managers not being handcuffed by storage constraints could lead to changes in practices which benefit users. For example they could hold on to more records than they normally would, if they were so inclined to do so, or

provide very high quality resolution pictures or movies because hard drive capacity is not so much an issue anymore.

Conclusion

It is good from a user perspective as they are able to access the information by themselves but it still requires the intervention of information professionals for indexing. I think a good example of this would be the Toronto City Archives which appears to link records to one another across multiple metadata threads. For the reasons pointed out by Forbes-Pitt (2006) computers are not sophisticated enough to index materials and records automatically which makes sense to the humans trying to retrieve that information. The discrete units method (Tough and Moss, 2003) puts records into sort of a vacuum and hopes that once the person retrieving it has it in their hands they can figure it out. As I have learned throughout the program this is generally not a good approach to information management as users tend to seek or think broadly, then narrow down, and not the other way around. So I think building safeguards to preserve record context into any storage and retrieval system should be a priority moving forward.

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