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Ethnographic sensitivity and current recordkeeping

Applying information culture analysis in the workplace

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to report on the application of information culture analysis techniques in the workplace. The paper suggests that records managers should use ethnographic sensitivity, if they want to have a constructive dialogue with records creators and users, and effect positive change in their organisations.

Design/methodology/approach – Two pilot studies were conducted in university settings for the purpose of testing an information culture assessment toolkit. The university records managers who carried out the investigation approached the fieldwork ethnographically, in the sense that they were interested in the perspectives of their end users, and tried to understand their information cultures, rather than imposing their recordkeeping concepts and procedures.

Findings – Information culture analysis was of practical utility in large complex organisations, providing an insight into behaviours, motivations, and most importantly promoted reflection and dialogue among organisational actors.

Originality/value – The paper raises awareness of the diversity of professional skills and knowledge required by records practitioners. It emphasises that to remain relevant to their organisations, records managers have to be receptive and sensitive to cultural influences.

Keywords Universities, Ethnography, Information culture

Paper type Research paper

Information culture reflects the values, attitudes and behaviours relating to the management of information in organisational or community settings; understanding the dimensions of information cultures is essential to achieve recordkeeping objectives. This has been the motivator underpinning research that developed the concept of information culture (Oliver and Foscarini, 2014), and the subsequent development of a toolkit for the Information Council on Archives to facilitate its analysis. However, information culture analysis may be at odds with the traditional practice norms of records managers. Consequently, one of the

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key challenges faced has been the development of guidance and analytical instruments that would facilitate nuanced insights into workplaces, for practitioners that are more accustomed to working with checklists and spreadsheets. This is in contrast to library environments (particularly academic libraries) where ethnographic techniques are more likely to be recognised as being essential to understanding user behaviour.

The purpose of this paper is to report on the application of information culture analysis techniques in the workplace. The paper begins by providing an introduction to the information culture concept, and explains the background to the development of a toolkit for analysis. This is followed by an overview of ethnography in information settings. A successful application of the information culture assessment toolkit requires an ethnographic-like approach, that is, an attitude of dialogue and collaboration among the parties participating in the information culture assessment exercise. Findings from information culture analysis in two university settings are reported and the new insight gained as a result of ethnographic exploration of recordkeeping environments is discussed.

Information culture

Understanding the dimensions of an organisation's information culture provides an insight into the values, attitudes and behaviours that will influence the success or failure of recordkeeping goals. The concept was first identified relatively recently (Ginman, 1993) and has subsequently attracted further attention from researchers internationally (see e.g. Choo, 2013; Sundqvist and Svärd, 2016). Information culture has been identified as one of the three facets for analysis (together with business processes and access) that constitute the recordkeeping informatics matrix (Upward *et al.*, 2017) and is thus instrumental in the reconceptualisation of records management for current and future environments. A three-level pyramid model has been developed and used as a framework to explain the concept for practitioners [ref removed for peer review]; however, operationalising the concept, moving beyond theory into practice, is an ongoing challenge.

The International Council on Archives is funding a project to develop a toolkit for the analysis of information culture. Preliminary case studies of four national archival authorities were conducted in 2015-2016. The archival authorities were situated in different parts of the world, and at various stages in transition from paper to digital environments. Findings from these case studies enabled the development of a prototype toolkit. Components that have been developed to date include an interview guide and templates for the analysis of interview data and for the development of an overall information profile[1]. The concept of information culture is universal in that it is applicable to all organisations and communities, regardless of complexity, geographic location or sector; thus, it is essential to ensure that the toolkit reflects that universality, and is not developed for one specific type of institutions. Hence, trialling toolkit components in different settings are of key importance and have highlighted the need for ethnographic sensitivity in records practitioners.

Ethnography in information settings

Ethnography, the scientific study of peoples and their cultures has its basis in anthropology, the study of past and present human societies. Descriptions of culture are central to ethnography, providing an alternative to biological explanations of behaviours and practices for early anthropologists (Campbell and Lassiter, 2015, p. 8). The practice of ethnography has been described as "an artful, humanistic form in search of meaning, connection, and above all, change", with a necessary emphasis on collaborative relationships and actions (Campbell and Lassiter, 2015, pp. 10-11).

"Pure" or traditional ethnography involves collecting data over long periods of time of a year or more spent in the field, living or working alongside the people that are the subject of study (Cavaye, 1996, recommends at least a year in organisational settings). However, smaller scale studies conducted over shorter periods of time – described as "rapid ethnography" (Khoo *et al.*, 2012) or "ethnographish" (Lanclos and Asher, 2016) – are also recognised as ethnographic in nature. The analytical projects reported in this paper can be regarded as being in the latter category, representing a manifestation of rapid ethnography, or ethnography-lite.

Evidence of the use of ethnographic approaches by practitioners in current recordkeeping environments is difficult to find. A noteworthy exception is a case study reporting experiences of embedding a records manager into a quality assurance team of administrators (Bowker and Villamizar, 2017). Bowker and Villamizar were motivated to develop and implement this strategy by drawing on research reported in the library literature, in particular, the work of David Shumaker and colleagues (Shumaker and Talley, 2009; Shumaker, 2012). Embedding was viewed as an alternative to consultancy services which are frequently relied on when faced with recordkeeping issues (Bowker and Villamizar, 2017, p. 59).

There is much more evidence of the application of ethnographic approaches in library environments, particularly in academic libraries serving faculty and students in higher education, particularly universities. There is a long-standing tradition in library work for ethnographic-type activities. Siyali Ramamrita Ranganathan, one of the most influential library scholars of the first half of the twentieth century, urged librarians to "follow the reader" to understand user behaviour (Ranganathan, 1931, cited in Connaway, 2015). In 2012, 81 reports of ethnographic studies in libraries were identified, with just over half of these published from 2006 onwards (Khoo *et al.*, 2012). The increase in frequency of ethnographic studies has been attributed to successful high profile studies of student activities conducted by academic libraries in the USA (Lanclos and Asher, 2016). In Great Britain, a very strong user experience in libraries community is developing, represented by the UXLibs series of events and book (Priestner and Borg, 2016). The first UXLibs conference in 2015 involved "delegates from the UK, US, Canada, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland and beyond explore ethnography, usability and human-centred design first-hand as a means of gathering invaluable behavioural and attitudinal user research" (Welcome to UX Libs!, 2017).

The extent of the published literature available, reporting specific case studies, means that the library community has a range of resources available to assist with developing and implementing ethnographic methods. OCLC published a wide-ranging study using ethnographic methods entitled the library in the life of the user (Connaway, 2015). Outputs from this study included an annotated bibliography of the ways in which librarians have sought to provide user-centred services (Connaway, 2015).

The value of ethnographic studies for academic libraries is very concisely summed up in the following words:

> The richness of qualitative data ethnography provides more than supplement the quantitative data academic institutions are more familiar with collecting about themselves, and answers questions we didn't know needed asking (Ramsden, 2016, p. 367).

In other words, we don't know what we don't know. A focus exclusively on measuring and collecting numerical data, or comparing and engineering standards and models, risks limiting perspectives to a very narrow view of existing systems, official practices and standardised processes and does not facilitate a natural progression for innovative and creative solutions. Ethnography has been described as an effective antidote for a reliance on quantitative measures which are characteristic of universities (Lanclos and Asher, 2016), doubtless reflecting funding models based largely on student enrolments and successful completions. In the recordkeeping domain, it may be argued that ethnography could usefully be used to counteract traditional prescriptive approaches focusing on policy and system development and implementation, where the human factor plays a rather marginal role.

When developing the components of the prototype toolkit to analyse information culture, it rapidly became clear that ethnographic sensitivity would be required to identify and interpret the data collected by observation and interview.

Trialling the toolkit

The information culture toolkit was piloted by two Australasian universities in 2016. Both universities are typical of their type: large, complex institutions with a tradition of siloed information management practices. Rather than attempting to analyse the information culture of the entire organisation, both universities identified specific units to pilot the toolkit with. There was interest in identifying the similarities and differences in the information culture between work units, and to understand how the culture affected staff members approach to, and understanding of, recordkeeping.

The information/records management units of both universities have similar mandates – they are responsible for the development of policy and procedures and the provision of advice and guidance to staff. As a corollary to this mandate, records management staff are required to influence and actively encourage staff to develop good recordkeeping practices. One consideration that emerged from the trialling of the information culture toolkit was that interpersonal communication is critical to a successful application of the toolkit.

The use of the toolkit requires records managers to “walk alongside” colleagues from different parts of an institution, so that they understand their specific challenges – some of which may be difficult to hear, as they may not be expressed directly. When using the toolkit, records managers need to be open-minded, non-judgemental and prepared to explore issues as they are raised and to reflect on the findings. The findings can inform how a records manager approaches a team, so that follow-up discussions may be reframed to ensure that there is understanding. This attitude may be described as “ethnographic”, in the sense that it relies on the same kind of respect for, and interest in, “the other”, that characterises the ethnographic method.

Before reporting on specific findings from trialling the toolkit, the effectiveness of the information culture toolkit is discussed.

Toolkit effectiveness

The issue of the effectiveness of the information culture toolkit to analyse people’s values and attitudes towards information rests on the records managers’ ability to approach their subjects with ethnographic sensitivity. The toolkit itself offers specific tactics that foster the kind of open dialogue that would allow the parties involved to make sense of each other’s positions.

The way questions are formulated in the toolkit interview guide, for instance, provides an opportunity for the records manager to shed light on the implications for staff of the records management programme in place. The interview questions never ask directly “where are all your records?” but instead try to tease out generally where people go to find the information they need, and what tools, systems or processes they trust the most for accessing information. Discovering how information is managed in the organisation in this way identifies opportunities for meaningful discussions with the staff about recordkeeping compliance.

Information culture toolkit interview questions acknowledge that staff in the organisation may not necessarily follow the official records management rules by, for instance, asking questions like, "Do you (or your team) have any personal information systems or procedures that you have developed to help you work more effectively?", and also, "Explain the criteria you use when it comes to deciding how and where to store important information that you have created as part of your job". A records manager with a more traditional, top-down understanding of recordkeeping may not even think to ask these questions, assuming that surely everybody should be doing exactly as they were trained to do, such as put every record into the electronic document and records management system (EDRMS), and follow any handouts or checklists provided through records management mandatory training.

The toolkit provides a vehicle for records managers and staff to reflect on their respective records management practices and beliefs. However, to be effective, it needs to be applied through an indirect and structured approach to identifying information culture characteristics. The questions included in the toolkit allow the records managers to realise whether their expectations can be met, and what is actually going on across the organisation (rather than assuming they know and crafting processes and rules accordingly). They also encourage the staff being interviewed to think about how their current practices may or may not align with the prescribed recordkeeping rules or other units' records management practices. This reflection opens up opportunities for both sides to openly discuss possible risks and areas that might need addressing as well as takeaways where things are working well and where innovative approaches to recordkeeping might be taking place.

In virtue of its emphasis on people's values and behaviours, the toolkit provides an avenue towards starting to understand how the information culture of individuals belonging to the same age group or nationality, or sharing similar educational or professional background (among other variables) may develop a certain group's attitude towards information, which may, in turn, influence the overall information culture of some units within an organisation. These insights support the development and tailoring of services by the records management unit. At the same time, they provide a platform for an open and frank discussion with teams and managers about the opportunities and risks of their current information and records management practices. Teams gain a better understanding of "why" recordkeeping is "good business", which, in turn, leads to an understanding of "why" recordkeeping is important, thus, supporting the practice of "how" it can be carried out meaningfully.

Official and unofficial systems and work practices

The results of the pilots confirmed what the records management staff suspected, namely, that there is a lack of understanding of the reasons for recordkeeping, leading to a disconnect between recordkeeping compliance approaches and expectations, on the one hand, and the practices and preferences of staff, on the other. This highlights some of the challenges faced in ensuring all university staff have an understanding of the need for the knowledge and skills to practice effective, efficient and compliant recordkeeping.

Staff trusted and applied work practices and tools that work and make sense to them, and that had proved reliable in the past. The primary source used for acquiring information on a certain topic was "other people" – and, in particular, long-term colleagues. It was interesting that in a workplace culture with a strong emphasis on the importance of documentary evidence, the staff value and trust primarily colleagues when gathering information. There was little awareness of the risks of relying on other people for information, how it could be coloured by individuals' preferences, and/or how this could impact getting a full and accurate picture of what had occurred. There was little understanding of the risks inherent in staff changeover, or memory not being as valued or recognised as a record in Western culture (e.g. in court proceedings), or of the importance of ensuring that business processes leave documentary traces in the form of texts, images, voice recordings, and any other available medium.

Systems that records managers do not usually recognise as "recordkeeping systems", e.g. email accounts, file-share services such as Dropbox and Google Drive, intranet and internet sites, were also high on the list of trusted systems. This highlighted the recordkeeping challenge of managing expectations between official recordkeeping systems and actual workplace practices. End users have a plethora of alternative systems and tools to use in their day-to-day work, and often are not provided with clear guidance about what systems and tools should or should not be used in different circumstances. Information culture analysis, and the underpinning ethnographic sensitivity, suggest that rather than assuming that use of these alternative or unofficial systems should be discouraged or banned, it would be more appropriate to explore options with a range of stakeholders to either incorporate the best features of these systems into traditional/compliant recordkeeping systems or to identify how these systems can be made more compliant.

It was particularly striking that records practitioners almost never hear staff say they cannot use Dropbox or Google Drive (or similar), while feedback on the use of more traditional EDRMS-type systems is often negative. The latter systems tend to reflect a life-cycle approach to keeping track of records that resembles the paper world. As such, they do not seem to be suited for a digital workplace where systems and process are fluid and evolving. By unreflectively supporting the implementation and use of these more traditional systems, records managers fail to recognise the needs of contemporary records and actual work practices.

University staff, in particular, have a requirement to collaborate and share information both internally and externally – and will look for products (e.g. systems, services and applications) that allow them to do as they need if they are not at hand. Understanding information culture means to support the development and delivery of products and services that are perceived as meeting the staff's work needs, while making sure the organisation remains compliant in relation to those business process involving high levels of accountability.

At one of the universities the records management unit is investigating alternatives to traditional EDRMS usages, by assessing other information management systems for recordkeeping compliance, and setting up integrations and tools that interact with a traditional EDRMS, to make it more user-friendly for the end user. At the other university, the records management unit is working on ensuring the fundamental requirements for recordkeeping systems are clearly articulated and well understood. They will then put the onus on the business owner to ensure that the systems in use meet the identified requirements.

Unanticipated benefits

Participation in the information culture process involved adopting ethnographic-like techniques (e.g. observation, interview, dialogue and sharing of practices) that offered people an opportunity to think about and articulate what their attitudes, beliefs and values were towards the information they created or were responsible for. All involved (records managers, regular staff and directors) were forced to question their own assumptions and to recognise that others' perspectives may be as valuable as their own. The information gathered through the analysis of information culture interview data provided both expected and unexpected benefits.

One of the unanticipated benefits of using the toolkit was that some directors, who would normally show no interest in recordkeeping issues, were eager to learn about the information culture of their units. In particular, they wanted to know how their local information culture may affect – in both positive and negative ways – the overall organisational performance. As an example, where there was an observed pattern of staff relying on personal contacts with colleagues or stakeholders rather than referring to official records on file, this provided an opportunity to reflect on the advantages and risks of this type of information seeking behaviour.

The analysis of interview data put into stark relief that within larger units, individual teams have their own information culture that may – or may not – share some similarities with other parts of the wider unit and the organisation as a whole. It became apparent through the interviews that some participants were equally bemused or confused by the information culture of other subunits or teams within both their own unit and across the organisation, as evidenced by comments about the ease or difficulty in finding information outside of their own silos. While records managers know that some areas are generally better at keeping records than others (e.g. accountants are usually more aware of the value of records than information technology experts), it was not anticipated that the variances would be so great between these small teams within units. Understanding that the information culture of a project team or task force may be very different from that of the larger unit it is placed in makes records managers more aware of the nuances in their interactions with end users.

Other findings from the information culture interviews showed that in the absence of clear guidelines, staff simply make up their own rules. The majority of interviewees asserted that they would prefer to be given guidelines and procedures. Where the unit or team had an established set of processes and expectations about what records should be created and where they should be stored, the interviewees were clearer about the benefits of recordkeeping than in areas where the guidelines and practices were absent or less perspicuous.

One of the outcomes of the information culture interviews resulted in records managers reconsidering what training is required – in particular, its frequency, how it is best delivered and the kinds of learning reinforced. Staff were asked specific questions about their knowledge of security and information and records management policies. Most staff acknowledged that they had read them, but the detail was lost in the mists of time.

Records management practitioners often espouse the value of "invisible recordkeeping", in particular, where staff are involved in the classification or disposition of records. Ideally, they tend to argue, staff should carry out such recordkeeping activities without realising that they are doing so. Conversely, use of the information culture toolkit has raised our awareness of the value of "conscious recordkeeping", where reflecting and discussing together about the meaning of making and keeping full and accurate records transforms managing records into a deliberate activity. This we believe has benefits for the individual, the team and the wider organisation.

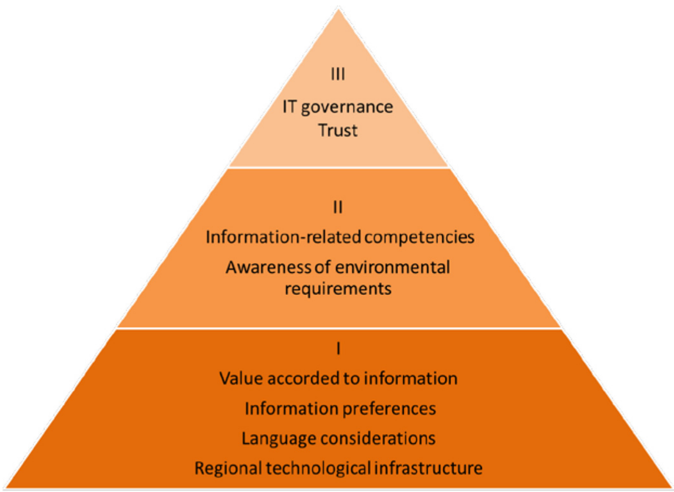
A three-level framework of analysis

The application of the toolkit in the universities identified the activities required at all three levels of the information culture framework (see Figure 1). For the records management staff, analysis of the interviews suggests that practitioners indeed need to consider a three-pronged approach addressing each of the levels of the framework.

In particular, Level 1 supports the identification and articulation of what the value of information – and therefore recordkeeping – is to the records managers conducting the interview, the individual interviewees, their teams and the wider organisation. Encouraging reflection on one's own information seeking practices, for instance, reinforces the notion of developing conscious recordkeeping. It also provides opportunities to flesh out what is important in terms of making and keeping records to the staff and business unit, thus helping the records management staff understand what that business units' key motivations are. This provides insights into goals and perceptions, and thus indicators as to how to communicate why recordkeeping is important and why it should matter to them.

Level 2 analysis of information-related competencies shows that practitioners cannot stop providing recordkeeping training and support in ways that encourage the development of quality practices across the organisation. Business units may have different needs and preferences in terms of training. The universities found that areas that are constantly collaborating and losing track of versions are especially interested in what a final document means and how to distinguish and store it so that others can easily find it. While areas that tend to be regularly audited need training that help them understand what they need to capture as evidence and at what point in the process. The lesson learned here is that providing general training on the basic skills of recordkeeping may be less effective than trying to tailor the message to each information culture group identified in the organisation.

The third level emphasises the need to continue to focus on information technology governance and trust mechanisms to ensure that recordkeeping requirements are embedded in any system and process at the design stage. In particular, Level 3 is a reminder that recordkeeping compliance must be addressed at the level of senior management.



Source: Adapted from Oliver and Foscarini (2014)

Figure 1.
Information culture framework

Records managers should put themselves in the position of influencing decision-making, so that they can ensure that new systems being purchased or implemented are recordkeeping-compliant from the start. It will support future recordkeeping activities if staff see the value to the organisation of having records managers represented at strategic decision-making tables.

Discussion

The use of the information culture toolkit provided an insight into the diversity of knowledge and understanding about recordkeeping one may encounter within an organisation. It showed that regular staff often do not have a level of awareness about recordkeeping requirements and practices that records managers assume or would like them to have. This insight helps explain why "non-compliant" software and solutions are often deployed without either consideration of key recordkeeping requirements or understanding of the specific information and records management practices of the organisation. Within a devolved university context, it may also explain the existence of team-specific information systems, which were intended to meet a particular project or team's needs, but do not support any strategic, integrated university-wide (or at least division-wide) approach to recordkeeping and information management.

Using the toolkit highlighted, among other things, that the language and technical terms used by records managers, and their traditional, top-down recordkeeping approaches, are often at odds with modern work practices, especially considering how recordkeeping is now embedded within other professional roles. While in the past, recordkeeping was the job of staff with specialised knowledge, since the advent of computers, recordkeeping duties, or administrative tasks requiring records to be kept, have been devolved to regular staff, without training them in the skills needed to create and manage a reliable record of their business activity.

There is value to records managers in understanding that each organisation, as well as each unit and team, may have its own specific information culture. Some information cultures are inherently more conducive than others to a straightforward application of standard recordkeeping rules or best practices (think of auditors and lawyers). Our approach as records managers should, therefore, be different for a team that is compliant "by nature" and, therefore, requires less information about the *why* and more about the *how* of recordkeeping than a team that does not appreciate the benefits of recordkeeping and where becoming aware of the *why* is more important than the *how*.

Understanding information culture can also inform how we determine priorities and use our resources across the organisation. A team that has a more compliant information culture may require less engagement and contact than one that is less compliant, particularly in the high accountability risk areas of the organisation.

These are important insights when it comes to providing training in the area of recordkeeping to regular staff. Ensuring that training measures are continuous, scalable and adaptable to the specific needs of each group of end users is one of the takeaways of this exercise.

The toolkit reinforced that good communication skills are a crucial requirement for a records manager. The process of interviewing and feeding back to units on their information culture requires the records manager to have a variety of communication tactics at hand to both engage positively with the staff involved, and encourage and influence improvements in understanding and practice. They should be good listeners as well. Here is where the "ethnographic sensitivity" reveals its power as a collaborative tool. Records managers and staff are expected to engage in a constructive dialogue about the situation they both wish to improve.

The toolkit does not provide all the answers, but it does shed light on what the actual problems and opportunities are as articulated by all organisational actors, not by the records managers only. The application of the toolkit confirms that one of the major obstacles to good recordkeeping is culture – staff understanding why and, to what extent, recordkeeping is important to their specific role and the organisation as a whole. Rather than blame others for not understanding or complying with our processes, the toolkit helps us realise that some of our own practices are actually clunky, time-consuming and difficult to apply in some specific contexts.

The findings highlighted the need to balance deploying "invisible recordkeeping" processes, where we cannot expect regular staff to take care of specific compliance obligations, with raising awareness, and thus triggering "conscious" actions, where self-reflection and understanding of values and duties are required to accomplish work properly – a "visible" and "negotiable" recordkeeping culture.

Conclusion

It is noteworthy that the single instance documented in the literature of a decision to embark on an ethnographic approach to records management was framed as an alternative to contracting a consultant (Bowker and Villamizar, 2017). A reliance on consultancy services could arguably be considered as characteristic of records management, perhaps denoting the immaturity or at least uncertainty of the profession.

The main goal of the information culture toolkit is to encourage reflection and dialogue among organisational actors. This cannot be under estimated in terms of its importance to professional competency standards. It is only through discussion and self-reflection that we can continue to grow and expand as a profession and move away from outdated practices and systems that perhaps no longer reflect the current day. Rather than keep focusing on designing and implementing compliant systems, the recordkeeping community (including both practitioners and scholars) should start engaging seriously with the end users of our systems. Sharing insights and reflecting on what we know and what we do not know, and what they know and what they do not know, what matters to us and what matters to them: these are cultural exchanges that can result in innovative, meaningful approaches to recordkeeping. If we just continue pushing compliance in isolation, both in terms of silo EDRMS and also through policy-driven conversations that do not harness cultural differences, then we really risk becoming irrelevant.

The information culture toolkit does not need to be used in isolation either. There are aspects of it that could certainly be incorporated into records managers' daily practices. For instance, some of the questions from the toolkit may be used at the start of a face-to-face training session, to get a good sense of where your audience is coming from. Other situations where referring to the toolkit components may be fruitful could be developing recordkeeping audits, assessing business systems for recordkeeping compliance, interviewing candidates for the position of recordkeeping professional.

The two pilot studies discussed in this paper, as well as the four case studies conducted in preparation of the information culture toolkit, were possible and successful because the workplace is ready for this kind of investigations. Practitioners have for some time realised that imposing systems and procedures that only work "in theory", in that they had been developed without paying attention to actual work practices, leaves both recordkeepers and end users dissatisfied and can engender dysfunctions in the organisation. Although exposing one's inner values, preferences and behaviours in relation to managing information and records may initially be intimidating, our studies show that the benefits of having this dialogue become soon apparent to both the interviewers and the interviewees. Looking together for suitable – i.e. "feasible and culturally desirable" (Checkland, 1999) – improvements to the current recordkeeping situation empowers all parties involved and provides a sense of shared ownership of any system or procedure thus developed. Furthermore, adding ethnographic sensitivity to the records manager's set of professional skills appears in line with participatory archival approaches and community-oriented thinking, which are major trends in the archival literature of the past decade (Shilton and Srinivasan, 2007; Allard and Ferris, 2015). A new professional ethos is in the air.

Note

1. Components are available for download from [https://figshare.com/s/b28a1a05073a14ed38c7] and have been translated from English into Spanish, French, Portuguese and Korean.

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