Creating Reliable Records for Better Decision Making

The concept of *provenance* is a key aspect of records and archival management theory. It describes proof of the origin or source of something (in this case a record) and the chain of custody regarding whose hands it has passed through since.

Capturing a record's provenance provides proof as to who the actors were in any given transaction or process and demonstrates that they had the appropriate authority to undertake it. It should also provide guarantees regarding the reliability of the content due to the known position and authority of the creator. Controlling and recording the 'chain of custody' then perpetuates these assurances throughout the remainder of its life.

Given the importance of provenance to creating reliable records, it is vital that the business has clearly defined processes surrounding the transactions it undertakes. This not only means knowing precisely how the transaction should be conducted, but also who should be involved within it and what their specific roles are. As part of this exercise, it is important to identify what records will be created at which points in the process, thus closely associating each record to the process they are documenting.

It is often the case that systems which create structured data, such as relational databases, employee record systems etc are better equipped to automatically control and capture record provenance. Access is usually via a password controlled login which validates the identity of the creator. Any records created or edited during that session will then be automatically associated to that particular user. The user's profile can also be used to determine what system rights they have access to and therefore what transactions they can undertake.

It can be more difficult to achieve this level of control with unstructured records such as text-based documents, spreadsheets etc. Measures to address this may include:

- Limiting access to particular areas of the record storage facility (i.e. particular folders or areas of the file plan) to specific identified users
- Creating official templates for use when creating specific record types (meeting minutes, project plans, annual review forms etc) and limiting access to them to certain identified users
- Ensuring the document properties are picking up the correct authors name from their log in and/or making manual completion of the author field mandatory on document creation
- Considering the use of biometric authentication systems to confirm the identity of the creator
- Ensuring the 'header' metadata documenting the transfer information is retained with any emails saved outside of the email client

Creating Complete Records

Creating records which contain all relevant content and contextual information not only ensures that the transaction in question has been fully and appropriately documented, but also that the record has value as a source of information to others.

Any 'record' which has parts of its content missing, or is otherwise incomplete, will clearly not be reliable as a source of evidence and is likely to be disregarded as such. This could leave the business unable to explain its actions and thus defend its legal interests.

Incomplete records not only reduce their informational value, they can also prove to be positively misleading and potential dangerous. The user may not be aware of important additional information, amendments or clarifications which may fundamentally alter the meaning of the record. This may lead to well-meaning but incorrect decisions being made based on false assumptions.

Records that are incomplete will be reliant on the memory, knowledge or experience of the end user to 'fill in the blanks'. Where all staff are in possession of such skills, this may not be an issue in the short term. However, temporary contracts and high staff turnover mean that few areas of the business will be in this situation. Furthermore, the longer after the point of creation that the record is accessed for information, the less likely it is that the memory of staff can be relied upon to 'fill in the gaps' - thus increasing the risk.

How to Create Complete Records for your Business

- When designing a new record-creating system, define exactly what information it is appropriate to capture (time/date, location, author, purpose, outcome etc) and where possible use system design to capture this information automatically as part of carrying out the transaction
- When designing document and form templates consider their design and specify which elements must or should be completed. Use document properties to enforce completion of all mandatory elements
- When archiving emails as records ensure that all component parts of the message are retained as a complete set (for example, content of message, transmission information and attachment(s).
- Ensure any files containing OLE links to other associated files are managed consistently and that the links are retained. This may be especially important when moving files from one location within the file plan to another, or when deleting some files.

"OLE: Object Linking and Embedding (OLE) is a technology that allows embedding and linking to documents and other objects, developed by Microsoft. It is founded on the Component Object Model. For developers, it brought OLE custom controls (OCX), a way to develop and use custom user interface elements."

- Consider the appropriate 'unit of management' for a record. For example, when managing web resources, does each webpage stand alone as a complete record, or is it more appropriate to consider the complete website as the record?

Reliable Records

Authenticity, completeness and reliability are key qualities common to all records worthy of the name. In many regards a record's overall reliability will, to a large extent, be determined by the degree to which these other two qualities are present but it also exists as an important quality in its own right. A record may have been created by the appropriate, authorised person and it may contain all of the elements that it should but these will count for little if that content is itself factually incorrect.

The business faces the same risks if creating unreliable records as it does if creating incomplete records, in terms of decisions being made based on inaccurate data. However, where content is present but incorrect that risk is increased. This is because the likelihood of it being accepted as the truth and acted upon as such is correspondingly higher. It is not difficult to imagine examples of where incorrect information stated in unreliable records could materially damage the interests of stakeholders. For example, incorrect grades associated to a student, the wrong salary paid into a member of staff's bank account or measurements mistakenly recorded in feet rather than metres on a plan.

Steps to Creating Reliable Records

- User training is often over looked as a critical aspect for ensuring the creation of reliable records. With a few notable exceptions (for example minute taking training for secretaries) there is often little emphasis placed on training staff to accurately record the transactions they perform. IT training is a good example where staff will be trained on the details of how to use Microsoft Word to create a document, but seldom on what it is they should be using it to create.
- System design should reduce the amount of data fields requiring manual entry by relying on macros and formats which enable data exchange between systems (such as XML).
- Errors often occur when staff are pressed for time and attempting to deal with a range of processes at any one time. The institution should attempt to create a culture which acknowledges that time spent creating accurate, reliable records is equally as valuable as that spent performing the functions to which they relate.
- Good practice itself helps create a 'virtuous circle'. If users have access to accurate records when researching their work, the chances of they themselves creating accurate and reliable records is increased.

It should also be remembered that when dealing with personal data it is a legal requirement to ensure that records containing personal data are *accurate and where necessary up to date.*

Lastly, as the main source of the historical record charting the development and progress of the business, it is clearly in its long term interests to ensure that the records it creates are as accurate and reliable as possible.

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