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FUNCTIONAL APPROACH TO ELECTRONIC RECORDKEEPING

Background

There are some recordkeeping environments where a distinction is made between records and archives, and where records' life-cycle is divided into an active phase taken care of by records managers and into a historical phase taken care of by archivists. In Finland, records management and archives administration have always been united, which is why I prefer to use the term "recordkeeping". They couldn't have been separated when no fundamental distinction is made between records and archives. All recorded information created or received in the course of business activity is records. A record is part of the creator's archival fond from the moment it is created or received, and thus all records, irrespective of age and retention periods, are archival material.

When the need to modify recordkeeping responsibilities of record creators towards a more proactive approach arose in the US in 1930's, a new function of records management and a new profession of records managers emerged. When the same happened in Finland several decades later, active records management was enhanced by implementing archival intervention in the early stages of records' life span. Though the Finnish recordkeeping community chose a very different approach from the American one, counterwords for English terms "records management" and "record's life-cycle" were introduced into Finnish recordkeeping terminology to describe this new recordkeeping policy.

In Finland "record's life-cycle management" describes an approach where the domain of archival administration begins at the moment of record creation – an approach that is nowadays called internationally "the continuum approach". "Records management" refers to the part of records' life-cycle when it is in the custody of the creating agency and when the needs of the business activity are part of recordkeeping requirements. However, there has never been separate professions of records managers and archivists - in Finnish language there isn't even a counterword for "records manager". Recordkeeping professionals, whether they work with active records in agencies or with historical records in archival institutions, go through identical professional education and belong to professional associations of archivists.

"Archives Formation"

The continuum approach to recordkeeping in Finland is best demonstrated in the concept of "archives formation" – a literal translation from Finnish. The instrument of archives formation is the national application of records schedules – an "archives formation plan". However, Finnish records schedules are not quite the same as their foreign counterparts I'm familiar with. This is one of the reasons why it has proven to be extremely difficult to find a suitable English term to describe this concept and its instrument. In my presentation I'm going to discuss this Finnish method of functional approach to recordkeeping and its significance in electronic recordkeeping – in

universities as well as in other government agencies. Since it has been impossible to find a good English title, I'm going to call it AMS which is the Finnish abbreviation for "archives formation plan".

As the Finnish title for AMS reflects, its substance is archival intervention in the early stages of records' life span. However, the title is misleading – and thus unsuccessful - because it gives the impression that the management methods of historical records are brought from the vaults to the offices, when in fact it means that archivists employ records management methods and tools. The essence of AMS is to plan or to map out the life-span of records already before they are even physically created, and to base their management rules and procedures on the evaluation of requirements rising from functions and activities that originate the records.

The Archives Act of 1981, which purpose was to modify the recordkeeping responsibilities of record creators towards more proactive records management, made AMS mandatory for each government agency. For the National Archival Service, AMS is a tool for determining records which have continuing value and are to be transferred to the custody of the National Archival Service. For the record creator, AMS is the tool for defining and documenting a recordkeeping policy, which guides the management of records from the moment of their creation to their disposal or transfer to an archival institution. The ideal process for drawing up an AMS is very similar to the methodology for designing and implementing a records system presented in the ISO15489 International Standard on Records Management¹.

In Finland, "records' creator" is a far more important concept than "archival fond" or "archives". The process of drawing up an AMS begins by defining the records' creator. This is done by analyzing the agency's organizational structure and its administrative, legal and business environment. More and more often a maximalist approach to provenance is taken when doing this, which means that an organization as a whole, not each unit of it - e.g. a university as a whole, not each department or faculty - is seen as a records' creator. This has major effects in the next phase of the process which is identification and analysis of business activity: functions, activities and business processes of the records' creator. When an organization as a whole is defined as records' creator, the flow of business processes is identified throughout it, regardless of organizational boundaries. Identification and analysis of business activity is done by collecting information from documentary sources and by interviewing people with expertise from different functional areas.

This phase produces the functional classification system or schema that supports all recordkeeping processes: registration, retention and disposal, access rights and archival arrangement. In Finland, the object of registration is not a record but a business process, and all records relating to the same process get the same registration number that identifies the business process and the function it is part of, and thus links records to their functional context. More and more often archival arrangement is based on this functional classification system, too, so also record series convey the functional context of records.

The second phase of the process of drawing up an AMS is to identify the types of records each business process originates; to identify information systems in which records are created and maintained, and to assess these records and information systems in order to measure existing recordkeeping procedures. This again is done by interviewing people who are responsible for the business process and for the management of records. The third phase of the process is to determine records management and archival administration rules and procedures based on identification of

¹ ISO 15489-1:2001(E), first edition 2001-09-15, Part 1: General, pages 10-11.

legal, business and informational requirements for records throughout their life span. In other words, the objective of these management rules isn't just to ensure that records are capable of supporting business activity and organizational accountability, but that they are also evidential and easily accessible historical sources later on in their life span. The fourth phase of the process is to implement AMS and then to sustain it according to changes in business activities or records systems.

This continuum from records management to archives administration means that in Finland an archival fond is not viewed to be a body that should be left to accumulate on its own, but a body whose accumulation should be consciously determined with archival expertise at the time of record creation. The management rules defined in AMS determine also the archival arrangement of records and this arrangement is done by the records' creator before records are transferred to archival custody. Thus in Finland, archival fonds are not viewed from present to past, as something that is, they are viewed from present to future, as something that becomes. As the focus of archival administration is on the early stages of records' life span when records are tightly associated with functions and activities that originate them, it's natural that a functional approach to recordkeeping is so emphasized in Finland. This traditional approach, which was developed years ago for the management of growing amounts of paper records, is a great advantage in meeting the challenges of modern electronic recordkeeping.

AMS and electronic recordkeeping

Thus far AMS has been a recordkeeping manual that has guided actions taken by people. In electronic recordkeeping environment AMS needs to be developed into an electronic information system integrated to business applications that create and maintain records. This has already been done by building AMS into special recordkeeping applications but this kind of implementation leaves a vast amount of electronic records outside records management controls. In electronic recordkeeping AMS could be an authority system that contains recordkeeping administrative metadata and applies recordkeeping to records in different business applications. Instead of the need to define and implement records management administrative metadata and recordkeeping requirements individually to all business applications, AMS can work as a single software that manages all electronic records. However, achieving this requires improvement in the structure and content of paper-based AMS. The core area of improvement is the classification system, which needs to be more particular. Also all relevant records management administrative metadata should be included in AMS.

All over the world national archival institutions and other interested parties have defined functional and metadata requirements that information systems must meet in order to qualify as recordkeeping systems. In Finland, AMS is the key instrument in documenting metadata requirements and the key component in implementing functional requirements in electronic recordkeeping. I'll use as a comparison example the "Model Requirements for the Management of Electronic Records" – MoReq - published by the European Communities in 2002². Recordkeeping administrative requirements identified in this manual relate to classification scheme, controls and security, retention and disposal and capturing records. In all of these areas AMS has a role in defining and documenting the requirements and in managing records in different business applications accordingly.

² <http://europa.eu.int/ISPO/ida>

MoReq states that an electronic records management system must support and be compatible with the organizations hierarchical classification schema³. This schema defines the way in which electronic records will be organized into electronic files and the relationships between the files. In Finland, this classification schema is compiled in AMS. According to the ISO Records Management Standard classification system should be based on an analysis of the organization's business activities⁴. In Finland, classification of active records has been based on functional schema for years already, and more and more often archival arrangement is based on this same schema, too. AMS offers one classification of an organization's total business functions and activities which is relevant in all business applications. This classification system establishes a relationship between records residing in different business applications and defines the hierarchy of an organization's electronic archival fond as a whole.

AMS can also work as a tool in determining what information should be captured as records in business applications – in other words determining what records should be created in each business process. This wouldn't be possible if the approach for recordkeeping was based on record type or content. A functional approach – in practice a functional classification schema – enables the analysis of requirements for record creation and records management in different business processes. In a business application a document is captured as a record when it is assigned a classification code which associates it with its business context and the file and series it's part of. This classification code is also a link to AMS and to all records management administrative metadata determined for the record in AMS.

Thus a classification system is also the means for deriving metadata values for records from the AMS. Hierarchical classification enables metadata values to be derived to all records in a certain series or a certain file without the need to apply the value individually to each record. However, the level in which functions and activities are analyzed in paper-based AMS is not sufficient when the goal is to derive metadata values automatically. In order to achieve an accurate metadata value – or even a default value – for records automatically from AMS, the classification system must be able to separate records originating from different business transactions – and thus with different management rules - to different categories. This may require that the functional classification schema is supplemented with additional classification codes for different groups of records.

Access rights and retention rules are the core records management administrative metadata values that can be derived from AMS. In Finland, a government record is open to access – we call it a public record - from the moment of its creation, unless there is a defined legal ground for determining it classified. Classified records are assigned with predefined security category codes and personal access rights to these records are linked to these codes. One of the recordkeeping administrative rules that have been determined even in a paper-based AMS is wheather a record is public or classified and the security category code of classified records.

There are business transactions of which it's easy to identify that the records they produce are either public or that they are classified, but there is also a vast area of business transactions that produce records that can be public or classified depending on their informational content. Thus a record's access status and especially its security category code that are derived from AMS are often just default metadata values that the user must adjust when handling the actual record. Besides linking personal access rights to metadata values derived from AMS, access rights of different personnel groups can be linked with functional classification codes: e.g. only people working in personell administration have access rights to records originated by this activity.

³ page 17

⁴ page 14

The importance and potentiality of AMS is evident in the area of retention and disposition. In Finland, government agencies don't have authority to dispose of records until the National Archival Service has determined records with continuing value. The record creator defines retention periods for other records based on legal requirements and the needs of business activity. As said before, AMS is the tool that the National Archival Service uses when it evaluates records with continuing value in individual agencies. MoReq states that an electronic records management system must provide a function that specifies retention schedules⁵ and in Finland, AMS is a retention schedule and provides this function. In electronic recordkeeping records' retention periods and disposition rules can also be automatically derived from AMS to records in different business applications based on their classification code. The retention period prescribes how long a record is to be kept and the disposition rule prescribes when it is to be transferred from one storage medium or location to another. Based on this metadata records are destroyed or transferred from business applications to long term storage either on paper or in some electronic format and medium.

In conclusion

AMS is a good example of the typical challenge our profession is facing when moving towards electronic recordkeeping. The essence of our methodology - or the concepts behind our methods - are as sound and relevant in electronic recordkeeping as they are in the world of paper records. However, it is their practical implementations that need to be improved – and sometimes even beyond recognition. Electronic records don't act like their counterparts fixed on paper and therefore they can't be managed by similar tools. In some cases the transformation from paper-based tools into electronic recordkeeping tools is easier than in other cases, and I think that AMS represents the easier ones.

The strength of the concept of “archives formation” is in its functional and continuum approach to recordkeeping – both terms that were quite unknown in the late 70's when certain Finnish archivists produced this concept. The importance of archival intervention in the early stages of records' life span, as well as the profits of functional approach to recordkeeping, have become internationally recognized along with the advancement of electronic recordkeeping. I think that recordkeeping professionals in Finland - in universities as well as in other government agencies - have an advantage in meeting the challenges of the digital world because we have based our work on these principles and methods for years already. It remains to be seen if we can utilize this advantage and succeed in developing AMS into the powerful tool of electronic recordkeeping that it could be.

⁵ page 27