

Back to the Future:

Submission for the Report on Australian Government Administration

A powerful constant and unwritten theme running through this highly imaginative document is the role and vital need for recordkeeping. Keeping accurate and reliable records provides the three elements that are vitally necessary to fuel reform and sustain policy and therefore good government. Without recordkeeping assessing and reviewing existing, let alone future reforms to policy processes, is an intellectually dishonest and morally bankrupt waste of good time and resources. A more intelligent account rather than my following view of the issue is found in AS/ISO 15489.

In this brief analysis I will attempt to suggest why recordkeeping is an essential part of policy reform.

Following this I will describe how the current communications environment is both a source of great opportunity as well as a problem. Finally, I will suggest why recordkeeping should be an area of study for the proposed Australian-New Zealand School of Government.

Firstly, recordkeeping provides the essential principle of accountability. This principle underpins the trust and transparency required through legislative frameworks and the delivery of sound policy to meet the needs of all Australians.

The second element is the key role of recordkeeping to identify, marshal and employ resources to develop, implement and review policy. This element links fiscal, material resource and accountability to the art and science of the policy process.

The third element covers corporate knowledge. This information provides the crucial content for developing, implementing and reviewing policy. There are legion anecdotes of re-invented wheels. Typologically these stories also discuss wheels of many different configurations, shapes and possibilities of movement.

This call for much-needed reform is occurring at a paradoxical time in Australia's bureaucratic, political and social history. With the computer revolution the regimented strength of traditional registries gave way to the massive explosion of computer-based knowledge with the subsequent chaos followed by the laissez faire unregulated flood of information supporting policy. In the wake of this tsunami of information supporting policy development there came attempts to technically and administratively control information within the public service.

Currently, efforts to establish regimes for creating and maintaining authentic, reliable and usable records for policy planning and implementing encounter the newer wave of digital communications marked by immediacy.

Immediacy refers to the range of digital technologies used by Australians to personally and professionally communicate with each other, business and government. As with many of the suggested reforms the information generated with a policy has to be harnessed and made available for sensible analysis as part of the review process. Capturing information in recordkeeping systems is therefore vital to identifying successful results.

As with most of this submission there are as many opportunities as issues of contention. The report driving this call for reform focuses on several key issues that recordkeeping would resolve. Firstly, information must be managed. Information costs too much in terms of time, people-power and finances to waste by re-inventing wheels. Secondly, recordkeeping would provide the intellectual fuel to power the essential evidence-based analyses and reviews that would direct the constant drive for integrated, flexible, efficient and affordable delivery of services to Australians.

The nexus between creating, capturing, managing and using information from records is a durable, flexible alliance between recordkeeping and information technology and communication. Communicating recordkeeping requirements to software designers should link information capability to technical capacity. The suggested Kennedy School of Government model as part of the curriculum offered at the Australia and New Zealand School of Government would be the perfect site to mediate management with technology and harness records-information management to technical information technology capability.

Harnessing records management to public policy will provide the vital evidence based analysis and review that means we can use resources efficiently to meet the perceived needs of Australia's citizenry. Recordkeeping would allow us, as often noted by recordkeeping professionals teaching records and archives management in Australia, to pay the price of creating information once and then efficiently and affordably using many times., until necessary changes were required to make the information useful and accurate.

As the pressures of decreasing financial resources and a diminishing workforce begin to affect the development and exercising of public policy in Australia sound records management will provide the essential collective and corporate memory of government. This collective-corporate memory would support government in providing public policy and serving the people of Australia.