



Australian Government



NATIONAL
ARCHIVES
OF AUSTRALIA

**Submission in response to
discussion paper on**

Reform of Australian Government Administration

**Advisory Group on Reform of Australian
Government Administration**

30 November 2009

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Introduction

The National Archives of Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide comments on the discussion paper on Reform of the Australian Government Administration.

The Archives plays a central role in the management and accessibility of government information. We note that the discussion paper is commendably wide-ranging, but we have limited our responses to those areas where the National Archives has a particular interest because of its unique functions or where the Archives more general experience as a government agency may help inform discussion.

For ease of reference, we have structured our comments in accordance with the chapters of the discussion paper.

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Chapter 2: Challenges in the strategic environment

Open Government

The Government's proposed legislative reforms will transform the public sector into a working environment that encompasses open government principles and the adoption of a pro-disclosure culture. Transparency and accountability are features of this environment. A fundamental challenge for the public sector in the next ten years in meeting these goals is the effective management of government information, no matter what ICT systems are used.

In order to meet increasing expectations of public sector responsiveness by the public and the Government, agencies will need to be able to rapidly call on accurate, verifiable and accountable records of government business. Agencies will need to process and manage government information and data efficiently and be able to match relevant information in order to meet obligations of accountability and transparency, while protecting the rights of individuals.

Information is created and stored today in digital and paper formats. Business processes are mainly digital and the quantity of information being digitally created is growing exponentially. The digital environment has significantly altered the way the Government creates, receives and manages information, and fundamental challenges exist for the public sector in dealing with the volumes of information and variety of formats in which this information exists. It is crucial that agencies have the capability to digitally manage information and records for their everyday business needs. It is equally important that the capacity exists across the Government to manage, preserve and provide access to information and records in the long term.

Given the development of a more participatory and consultative culture where the public engages more directly with the Government via emerging technologies, Government decisions, policies and processes will potentially be open to much greater public scrutiny. The more extensive release of government information resulting from pro-disclosure initiatives and the increasing confidence of citizens in dealing with government in the digital environment will raise expectations of service delivery standards and public sector professionalism. Australian Government agencies will only be able to meet these expectations by having sound information management policies and practices in place.

Effective information management

A key implication for how the public sector needs to operate into the future is the recognition that effective information management is integral to agency governance and agency business. It is important that information management is not regarded as an unnecessary or optional administrative burden. This is particularly relevant in a digital environment where managing information that provides the evidence of government decisions and actions, is an increasingly challenging and complex task.

Investment in the development of organisational and individual staff capability and skills in information management is a necessity. Agency responsibilities for information management, particularly in a period of budgetary restraint, need to be well defined to avoid misdirected or duplicated effort. The importance of sound records and information management needs to be reinforced. It is crucial that the Government takes steps to raise understanding of the value of information management in supporting accountability and efficiency across the public sector and to ensure that agency information management practices are efficient and streamlined. As the Australian Government workforce ages and experienced staff retire, a sustained effort will also be required across Government to address skill shortages in key professional and technical areas and to invest in training that equips all public sector staff to manage information in the digital environment.

Recent Australian Government reports have focused on the importance of information management for the efficient and accountable working of government, as well as the role it plays in the lives of Australian citizens. The Commonwealth Ombudsman's report *Lessons for Public Administration* (2007), and *Fact Sheet 5, Ten Principles for Good Administration* (2009) highlight the prime importance of maintaining accurate, comprehensive and accessible records. The Management Advisory Committee's report *Note for File* (2007) directly related high performing agencies with their recognition of the importance of good information management practices.

There is a clear need for a comprehensive and strategic approach to digital information management across government. This necessitates the adoption of clear guidelines and best practice standards across the public sector that supports a unified government information management message. The National Archives is active in providing digital information and records management advice, standards and products for government agencies. Government initiatives reinforce the value of these tools. Mandatory standards with a requirement to report on non-compliance are crucial elements in this strategic approach.

A strong culture of information and records management relies on leadership at the agency and whole-of-government level to drive policies and best practice. Promotion at the grassroots level is equally important in making requirements clear and raising the information and records management profile. This can be achieved at induction into Government employment for staff at all levels (including Senior Executive Service - SES), and through sustained government promotion and support for continual professional development of staff in the area of reporting.

The National Archives sees that the alignment of stakeholders across Government is crucial to the success of a strategic, holistic approach to managing information. The Archives has already worked in partnership with the Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO) on a number of government information

initiatives. Continuing and extending these partnerships across government to include a range of information management stakeholder agencies should lead to a clearer shared understanding of relative responsibilities and interests. It is expected that the Archives' central role in developing information management policy, standards and guidance will complement that proposed for the Office of the Information Commissioner in optimising efficiencies in the management of government information.

Chapter 3: An aspiration for Australia's public service

A highly performing public service

The Government's vision for the Australian Public Service (APS) includes:

- evidence-based policy making processes as part of a robust culture of policy contestability; and
- strengthened integrity and accountability.

Neither element of this vision can be realised without access to reliable, comprehensive and timely information. In turn, access to such information cannot be achieved without a holistic approach to information management. This approach should include the adoption and implementation of sound information management practices within agencies and across Government, the endorsement of these standards and a system of monitoring, auditing and reporting to ensure compliance and best practice. A high performing public service cannot display the five key characteristics outlined in Chapter 3 without access to reliable, comprehensive and timely information. A sound whole-of-government approach to information management will create the conditions for achieving flexibility and agility while retaining fundamental mechanisms that ensure accountability in government decision making.

Chapter 4: A values driven culture that retains public trust

Streamlined APS Values

Many of the current APS values are similar or are linked to other legislative requirements to which APS employees must adhere. A streamlined set of values may assist employees remembering, understanding and promoting the values. Simplifying the structure and messages of the values may also enable them to be incorporated more readily into everyday business practices.

The Ethics Advisory Service might be expanded to include a safe, independent mechanism whereby employees (including SES) can report instances where the values have not been upheld. Reporting these issues at a central level rather than at the agency level might reduce concerns about the potential perceived personal repercussions sometimes viewed by those staff reporting issues.

Chapter 5: High quality, forward looking and creative policy advice

Strengthening internal and external collaboration

Effective policy development and implementation relies on access to and sharing of information over time. Access to good information and sound information management practices underpin internal and external collaboration across the public sector in the digital environment and lead to business efficiencies. There is already considerable activity and expertise within the Australian Government to address information sharing. The National Archives is active in providing information and records management guidance, including digital systems advice, standards and products to improve interoperability and enable discoverability of information within government. The current sharing arrangements between the Australian Government and other Australian jurisdictions such as State and Territory governments support collaboration in policy development. Further development of a culture of information sharing across government and the willingness to make information available publicly, where appropriate, is fundamental to the principle of open government.

This culture of information sharing cannot be supported in a practical sense without the use of systems and standards across government that enable efficient information management, discovery, sharing and access across jurisdictions. The adoption of consistent standards across Australian Government agencies and where possible, other jurisdictions will benefit both management of information over time and sharing of information for collaborative purposes.

Fostering a stronger culture of innovation

A stronger culture of innovation in the public sector can be fostered through the sound management of information. The Cutler Report *Venturous Australia. Building Strength in Innovation* (2008) identified the importance of good information and good information flows to the efficiency of markets and in driving innovation. The ability to access, use, reuse and transform information is a key component of information flow across the private and public sectors. Innovation is also supported by information from trusted sources that is regarded as reliable and authentic. The Cutler Report recommended the establishment of a National Information Strategy which provides protocols for maximum access to government information. This has already been implemented as a national initiative – coordinated by AGIMO with support and involvement of the National Archives and all State jurisdictions. Adopting an holistic approach to managing government information is crucial to support innovative business practices within government agencies as well as wider innovation initiatives across government.

Chapter 6: High quality, effective programs and services focused on the needs of citizens

Bringing together the service design, delivery and policy formulation processes

The National Archives has a lead agency role in information and records management across Australian Government. The Archives has a responsibility to preserve and make accessible the records of the Commonwealth. As discussed earlier, this role includes fostering the use of systems and services that maximise accessibility and interoperability of government information.

The National Archives proposes that the use of standards based open formats for data storage and the use of openly specified data exchange standards should be mandated for all Australian Government agencies. This approach, which has already been pursued by the European Union and a number of U.S. states, will facilitate the ready availability of information over the long term and the efficient re-use of data across different systems.

The avoidance of proprietary formats or protocols will:

- ease agency to agency collaboration;
- accelerate the delivery of citizen centric services; and
- aid in the longer term preservation of government information.

Chapter 7: Flexibility and agility

Labour market mobility

Rather than an approach focussing on a particular mobility rate or target for agencies to achieve, there should be a more qualitative assessment to determine if agencies have been successful in attracting the required skills to achieve its outcomes. A target based approach may incur flaws as the focus becomes achieving a particular target rather than ensuring staff and skills are moving to the right agency at the right time.

Streamlining and central coordination of employee security assessments would ease the often considerable delay in the recruitment of external candidates and the transfer of APS employees between agencies.

Fostering a more unified public service culture?

A number of skills sets are highly competitive and it is difficult for the public sector to compete in the broader labour market. A possible solution is to review the current classification structure with a view to implementing an APS 'technical' structure (for example CPA, IT etc) providing competitive rates in the broader labour market. This

may reduce the competitiveness between Government agencies in the first instance and the number of individual arrangements required to attract and retain specialist skills.

Agency bargaining has also led to disparities in wages and conditions of service which is having an effect on mobility across the service. In addition, the technological culture of the public sector also creates disparities between agencies and attributes to significant resources required to tender, assess, develop and implement systems (for example payroll, email, record keeping etc). Whilst agencies often require modifications to suit their environment these should be limited as much as possible as they contribute to increased costs. Investigation of base platforms as a minimum may be appropriate.

Encouraging the pursuit of continuous improvement

Continuous improvement across the public service is linked to the quality of information available to staff over time and their ability to access it when needed to do their jobs. The Government should promote three key messages to contribute to this improvement process:

- Information is a key asset for government and should be managed accordingly.
- Information management should be resourced appropriately to ensure that the Government's information assets are captured and maintained.
- Managing information is not the same as managing ICT systems and technologies (these are just the containers or information carriers).

Chapter 8: Efficiency in all aspects of government operations

Mechanisms for systematic efficiency improvements

The adoption of a systematic approach to information management would improve efficiency across the public sector. As part of this approach, a broad information management regime for Australian Government agencies should be established to prescribe specific information management obligations. The National Archives currently develops and promotes standards and guidelines for use across government. The Archives' role in the future should complement that proposed for the Office of the Information Commissioner and other regulatory agencies.

Agencies need to adopt agreed standards for the management of information over time, including metadata standards, in order to facilitate access to and use of information. Useability over time can only be ensured by managing information proactively, including the implementation of systems and processes to ensure that issues of technology and format obsolescence are addressed early in systems development and implementation cycles. Adoption of these standards, systems development and management practices will allow agencies to avoid the subsequent costs associated with the failure to find, retrieve and access information in the short and long term.

It is important that the Government continues to emphasise statutory information management requirements as part of the proposed Freedom of Information (FOI) reforms. Recent reviews and current reform of FOI regimes have highlighted the fact that FOI is unlikely to be effective if information is not properly created and managed in the first place. If the information either does not exist or cannot be easily found, there can be no effective freedom of information. Dr David Solomon, in his recent review of FOI in Queensland, noted 'the importance of an effective relationship between freedom of information and records management in creating, or shifting the balance towards a citizen-centric information environment'.¹

The effective management of information is integral to doing business efficiently. Not managing information and not keeping records should not be seen as an option to save money. Substantial efficiencies can be realised by implementing sound information management. Efficiencies across government can also be realised when agencies are able to focus their information and records management resources on the management of records and information of high value.

Skills and capabilities to drive efficiency

Sound information management skills and capabilities for all staff are required to drive efficiency throughout the public sector. Capability at the organisational level is also an essential prerequisite for achieving broad based efficiencies.

A sustained investment by Government in qualified information and records management staff across the public sector is essential, as is a commitment to training to enhance the skills and knowledge of all APS staff about their information and records management responsibilities. Training also needs to be ongoing and adapted to meet emerging issues and changing work practices to secure the benefits of this investment over time. The National Archives has been active in developing and providing a range of training across the public sector for many years. The Archives is also involved in the development of new courses to meet the changing needs of government staff and in the systematic review of its existing training courses to ensure that they remain up-to-date with emerging issues.

Ensuring that Information and Communications Technology (ICT) staff in agencies obtain information management training is also essential to equip them to implement the effective integration of information and records management systems into agency business. Senior management agency staff have an important role in establishing a culture that values effective information management. In order to drive agency change towards better practice, it is crucial that these staff understand the strategic context of information management and its relation to broader agency risk management, as well as other key information management issues such as system integration that drive public sector efficiency.

¹ *Enhancing Open and Accountable Government: Discussion Paper Review of the Freedom of Information Act 1992*, p. 106. Available online at: www.foireview.qld.gov.au/FOIDiscussionpaper240108.pdf

Organisational information management capabilities are also important in driving efficiencies across the public sector. A key capability in resourcing information and records management is to provide appropriate dedicated information and records management staff. Staff need to have the organisational authority to develop, adapt and implement information management policy across their agency to ensure that the agency adopts Australian Government policies and standards. Agencies also need to develop the capability to ensure that the management, storage, custody, care and distribution of digital information is adequately resourced in the long term.