

## BOOK REVIEW

### **From Birth to Death or Paradise**

Catherine E. Hare and Julie McLeod, *Developing a Records Management Programme*. (The Aslib Know How series. Editor Sylvia P Webb). London 1997. ISBN 0 85142 386 8. 57 Pages.

Everyone now seems to accept - so Catherine Hare and Julie McLeod in their introduction - that the age we live in is the information age. This means that information is a key resource. For being efficient it is necessary to manage the information of an organisation properly, that means managing it in the form of records that the organisation generates and receives.

The authors understanding of „records management“ is that it is a part of information management. In this understanding the term „information management“ contains all types of information: internally produced and externally acquired and irrespective of format. Records management as a part of information management deals with internally generated proprietary information.

The authors are right in stressing the importance of this aspect in the respect that information is a key resource.

In spite of this importance and the fact that information of/in records is expensive in producing, unique and an advancement in competitiveness in over 40% of business at the moment there is no information management policy. In offices 45 minutes are wasted for searching per day and per person. 19 of 20 records are never looked at again after 5 years. The solution to this problem is developing a records management programme, i.e. a plan of action for achieving control of the records of an organisation and also a clear understanding for a purpose of records.

The publication of the authors is meant to be a guide, providing the framework and practical guidance for records managers.

It is not possible here to refer to the variety of aspects of the publication: I just want to pick out the most important things from my personal point of view.

In the 1930s in the US the life-cycle-concept of records was invented, a cornerstone, on which modern records management is built. Life cycle means „from birth to death, or afterlife“, if the records survive for ever as archives. The background of this concept was a more archival point of view. The recent records

management stresses the necessity of „birth control and family planning“ - an increasingly important aspect in the electronic age for archivists, too.

The stages in this life-cycle-concept are: creation - the life plan is established, based on the series to which the records belong; active phase - supporting business operations and decision making; semi-active phase:- retaining records for legal or fiscal reasons; disposition - destruction or transferring records to historical archives for historical value.

Records have a message, a medium and a context. A letter, a contract, an x-ray, an e-mail or a geological sample etc. are records. Numerous records in an organisation make it impossible to manage records individually, they can be grouped to series because they are related to common business activities. „Record series“ is an other key-concept of records management, because a group of identical and related records can be filed as a unit and that permits their evaluation as units.

The life-cycle concept is a framework for every records management programme. The programme itself contains the elements of analysing the need of information, recording, storing, finding, protecting and destroying. In the creation phase the questions of necessity, design, lifetime and format have to be answered, in the active phase maintenance and use, filing system, physical storage equipment, retrieval systems and security are the main aspects, in the semi-active phase storage, retrieval systems and security. Characteristic for the disposition phase is the lapsing primary value, i.e. the use for the creator: Records can be destroyed unless they have acquired secondary value as evidence of past events and can be transferred to historical archives.

At the end of the book in the chapters about the records audit, the retention schedule and the implementation of the programme in the organisation the authors give very useful advice from a practical point of view.

Today 90% of the records are still paper records. The major challenges of electronic records for records managers are the facts that the medium and the message are separated, accessibility is only guaranteed by technology, often only by the proper hard- and software, the problems with authenticity of electronic records - they can easily be changed or amended etc. There is, however, no place for complacency, only endeavours to solve these problems.

This publication by Catherine Hare and Julie McLeod is a good and useful instrument for records managers. It provides the framework as well as all the practical aspects of records management. But even for non-records managers -

especially librarians and archivists - it is a useful and informative publication, giving an introduction to records and records management problems.

From a traditional archivist's point of view there might be too much about real life of records and too little about the afterlife, paradise. But in the electronic age it becomes more and more important that archivists are involved in the whole life cycle of records, otherwise their paradise will contain no data.

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