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A common framework for measuring the impact of records management

**An assessment of the current evidence base demonstrating the
benefits of investing in the improvement of records management
– a selective literature review**

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Executive summary

Concepts such as cost and benefits measurement and return on investment are well established in most professional genres and are often expected and relied upon by senior management to help guide financial planning and strategic decision making. Until very recently records management appears to have considered itself relatively immune from such analysis, perhaps (overly?) confident in the self-evident importance of its status and (overly?) reliant on a pantheon of well-established arguments in favour of its ‘intangible benefits’, particularly legal compliance, in the era of data protection and freedom of information legislation.

But with an increasing drive to take an enterprise-wide approach to records management improvements and a commensurate rise in project costs, combined with a period of economic uncertainty which leaves any function not considered ‘core business’ vulnerable to cuts such arguments may no longer be seen as sufficient. Managers facing difficult investment choices require clear, accurate data calculating costs and the tangible benefits received in return, whilst practitioners need confidence that the path they tread is indeed delivering the best and most efficient return on investment possible.

This report examines the drivers pushing records management in this direction and explores the existing evidence base available to see whether it is indeed equal to the task of demonstrating the benefits of investing in the improvement of records management.

Background and context

This report forms the first work package to be delivered as part of a JISC-funded project: ‘A common framework for measuring the impact of records management’. Further information on the project is available from <http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/records-management>. The ultimate purpose of this project is to create a methodology whereby a business case for Records Management (RM) can be verifiably measured. One of the stated objectives within this project is to ‘clearly articulate why there is a problem with the amount of currently available evidence to confirm the economic benefit to institutions of implementing records management processes’. This report and the research which underpins it are designed to meet this objective.

Two further work packages will be released as part of this project during 2009. These are:

Work package 2: The Records and Information Management Impact Calculator will include the means by which users can capture and measure 3 distinct sets of data:

1. Benchmark data (i.e. the time and resources taken to undertake a range of records-related tasks *now*)
2. The costs of implementing the chosen records management solution (including both direct costs – such as software licence costs etc and indirect costs – such as the costs associated with end-users attending training sessions)

3. Post-implementation data (i.e. a repeat of the data collected for set 1 but for after the implementation of the selected records management solution).

The Framework will also enable Set 3 data to be added and compared over an extended period of time (e.g. after 1 month, 3 months, 6 months and 12 months). This will enable a more complete picture of the impact of implementing records management solutions to be derived through looking at its results in the immediate, short and medium term.

Work package 3: A Records Management Maturity Model which will effectively be a set of questions, grouped into themes, which can be used to plot where a particular institution is in terms of its own journey towards maturity in records management. The questions and the results returned will be non-judgemental in tone and designed to allow institutions to assess their current strengths and weaknesses in this regard and as a result, where any investment of resources may most profitably be targeted.

All outputs from this project will be freely available from the JISC infoNet website at <http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/records-management>.

Any questions or comments should be addressed to the authors: Steve Bailey (steve.bailey@northumbria.ac.uk) and Joanne Hyslop (joanne.hyslop@northumbria.ac.uk)

Objectives of this report

This report is a selective literature review of the evidence currently available to records management practitioners supporting claims of the economic benefit of records management initiatives to an organisation. The aim of the review is to establish the breadth of empirical data available and to assess its strengths and weaknesses for demonstrating the economic benefit of investment in the records management function.

As part of a larger piece of work funded by JISC, this report provides background and consideration that will support the development of an 'Impact Calculator', the aim of which will be to provide a means by which records practitioners and other interested parties can capture and measure data to provide evidence of the benefits of records management projects.

What is records management?

International Standard ISO 15489-1:2001¹ defines records as *'information created, received, and maintained as evidence and information by an organization or person, in pursuance of legal obligations or in the transaction of business.'*

The ISO 15489: 2001 then goes on to define records management as *'the field of management responsible for the efficient and systematic control of the creation, receipt, maintenance, use and disposition of records, including the processes for capturing and maintaining evidence of and information about business activities and transactions in the form of records'*. It states that records management includes activities such as:

- setting policies and standards;
- assigning responsibilities and authorities;
- establishing and promulgating procedures and guidelines;
- providing a range of services relating to the management and use of records;
- designing, implementing and administering specialised systems for managing records; and
- integrating records management into business systems and processes.

This report will adopt this as the general definition of records management.

Section 46 Code (Great Britain. Department for Constitutional Affairs, 2002, clause 5.1) states that *'The records management function should be recognised as a specific corporate programme.'* The records management programme provides a systematic approach to the management of records and is generally seen as the vehicle for implementing the records management function within an organisation. Shepherd and Yeo (2003, p.22) reinforce this stating that *'In any organisation, managing records should be a strategic function, with a continuing programme that is effective across the organisation as a whole.'*

¹ ISO 15489-1:2001 *Information and documentation – records management – part 1; general*, International Standards Organisation

What are the benefits of records management?

The records management function should impact across the whole organisation and not be confined to one central department. Due to its far reaching nature integrating the records management function into an organisation's business systems, processes and culture often requires a significant amount of resources.

Most organisations will commonly expect to derive benefits from resources invested; benefits can be described as the expected returns or improvements gained by an organisation from such an investment. Within the context of this review benefits can be usefully classified as either being *tangible* or *intangible* in nature.

Tangible benefits are those that can be quantified and are generally articulated in terms of measurable improvements or cost savings. An example of a tangible benefit would be a reduction in space required to store physical paper copies. As a general rule tangible benefits are expressed in monetary terms for inclusion in business cases, the above example could be expressed as the costs saved from no longer requiring the storage space, they can also however be quantified in other ways for example: achieving a 20% reduction in CO₂ emissions from reduced electronic storage.

Intangible benefits are non-quantifiable improvements to an organisation. Examples of intangible benefits might include improved standards of corporate governance or ensuring legal compliance. One could argue that by meeting statutory obligations one is avoiding legal costs but this can be problematic to quantify. If a benefit is to be quantified the metric needs to be robust, realistic and meaningful.

The benefits synonymous with records management are well understood and often repeated. These commonly include:

Intangible benefits

- effective compliance with the 8 data protection principles²;
- effective compliance with freedom of information and other information-related legislation;
- demonstrating the authenticity of records to increase the evidential weight for legal admissibility;
- improved decision-making and policy formation supported by reliable information;
- increased accountability by providing reliable records of actions and decisions;
- improved innovation and creativity through enhanced corporate knowledge management; and
- efficient collaborative working.

Tangible benefits

- increased efficiency in retrieval of records;
- increased efficiency in receipt and fulfilment of customer orders;
- reduced storage costs associated with keeping only required records;
- reduced storage costs moving from paper-based to electronic storage;
- reduced storage costs associated with offsite storage;
- reduced consumable costs associated with less paper-based records;

² Great Britain. *Data Protection Act 1998: Elizabeth II. Chapter 29 (1998)* London: The Stationery Office

- increased productivity associated with automation of information related tasks and use of document templates; and
- reduced staff costs due to efficient performance of information related tasks.

Should we measure the benefits of records management to the organisation?

The authors acknowledge the argument that records management is a core function of an organisation in the same way that human resources or financial services are and that as such should not be required to demonstrate a return on investment. Penn et al (1994, p.7) support this asserting '*The records management programme must exist because the function of managing recorded information is a necessity.*' The authors agree that the importance of, and benefits to be derived from sound records management practices to an organisation are not in doubt, but just because such views are (understandably) commonly held by information professionals this does not necessarily mean that they will be automatically shared by everyone – especially as 'records management' is a far less generally understood concept than the work of the human resources or finance departments. Moreover we should recognise that measuring the benefits of a function need not question its validity or its status; and we should recognise that it is standard management practice to understand the value added to the organisation from the expenditure of its resources.

In his publication on performance management Jones (2003, p.6) notes '*Good records management practice is an investment for the organisation although it could easily be viewed as an overhead. The need to demonstrate tangible returns on investment is crucial if the programme is going to continue attracting funding and support.*' This is a critical point – especially during difficult economic times – and reflects the two very different interpretations of the position of records management that can easily and understandably be arrived at by managers who are disinterested in the detail and (in the absence of supporting data) are only able to make a superficial judgement of records management's relative merits. In addition Jones (2003 pp.5-7) puts forward four main benefits to measuring the performance of the records management programme. These are:

- *Assessing the success – 'Simply performing a good service is not in itself enough to justify continued support - it is important that success can be measured, evaluated and ultimately communicated';*
- *Communicating success – 'Records managers sell the necessity for a records management programme in many ways e.g. financial savings, improved productivity, greater transparency', performance measure 'is a positive way to reinforce this message';*
- *Financial considerations – 'The need to demonstrate the tangible returns on this investment is crucial if the programme is going to continue attracting funding and support'; and*
- *Improvement – 'performance measurement is also about continuous improvement allowing incremental modifications and improvements to be made'.*

With the advancement of technologies particularly with the development of electronic storage, digitisation, and enterprise-wide system solutions the cost considerations of a records management solution can often represent an appreciable amount of an organisation's resources. In trying to solve its record keeping requirements an organisation may have a number of complex option choices available to it, each option with its own set of costs and benefits. For example the Department for Business Enterprise Regulation and

Reform³ (under the guise of its predecessor, the Department for Trade and industry) had spent £49.7m up to February 2008 on its 'Matrix' EDRMS project (Bailey, 2008). This may be at the extreme end of the spectrum but does help to establish the scale of potential investment in this area.

The increase in technologies has implications for the identification and management of an organisation's records. Issues relating to the management of electronic documents concerning the introduction of desktop PCs and email systems are still being identified and addressed within the organisation. Web 2.0, social software, collaborative tools, and portable devices all have an impact on an organisation's records management and corporate governance. Being able to articulate the benefits of records management will assist in raising the profile and necessity of the function within the organisation, allowing the opportunity to be involved in the decision-making process as organisations move forward with new technologies.

With this in mind the authors believe that records management practitioners will need to be familiar with relevant performance measurement methodologies so that, where possible, they can articulate the added value an on-going records management programme will give to their organisation.

This report will look at the evidence base available to support claims of the efficiencies achieved by investment in records management and the added value it gives to an organisation, providing a summary of the sources of information available and a critical analysis of the evidence and the methods used to obtain it.

Methodology adopted and overview of sources

In determining the evidence base available a range of published sources was drawn upon, including:

- academic research studies and informed opinion reported within UK and international journals;
- reports from professional bodies and associations including professional magazines and websites; and
- industry market research surveys and commercial white papers, including vendor sales information.

Conducted between April and June 2009, the systematic desk-based research centred on information readily available via the internet, plus specialist records management magazines and journals. The websites of key academic and professional bodies associated with records management provided a starting point, followed by market intelligence research agencies active in the areas of information technology and records management.

In addition to the literature available online, a research exercise to uncover empirical data held *within* organisations for internal decision-making processes and not therefore generally publicly available was undertaken.

A general description of the types of literature covered follows, whilst a definitive list of the sources consulted is provided in the bibliography.

Online Survey

Anecdotal evidence indicated that only a small proportion of the data created to measure the benefits derived from improved records management may be in the public domain with organisations preparing

³The Department for Business Enterprise Regulation and Reform disbanded on 6 June 2009 on the creation of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

information relating to the costs and benefits of records management for internal consumption only. To try to ascertain the extent of such activity and to potentially gain confidential access to it as part of this research project an online survey was conducted from May 28th to June 12th 2009; the survey was publicised via key records management related email distribution lists and online via the JISC infoNet website. 77 responses to the survey were received; full details of the survey are available in Appendix A. Four follow-up interviews took place during June 2009 with those respondents who were willing to share their experiences. The information obtained from the interviews has provided examples and illustrations of how organisations are currently approaching the area of benefits realisation and measurement and how organisations can put such data to good use to further the cause of the records management function.

Academic Journals

An academic journal publishes scholarly, peer-reviewed articles written by experts. The function of a journal is to distribute knowledge. There are a limited number of journals related to the field of records management. The main Journals consulted were the Records Management Journal and the Information Management Journal.

Professional bodies' magazines or trade press

Professional bodies or associations tend to produce a professional magazine which provides comment, analysis, case studies and news concerning various areas of the profession. The articles within the magazines are not peer-reviewed, unlike the papers in the academic journals. They tend to be short in length and are often of a practical nature, written for practitioners either by practitioners, vendors or consultants in the field. In the context of this report professional magazines would also include material made available via the professional body or association's internet sites.

Market intelligence research surveys

There are a number of market research and analysis firms specialising in information technology, telecommunications and consumer technology who conduct primary research on behalf of clients with the aim of discovering what people want, their opinions, values and the expectations they have. This research also seeks information on the decision-making process or actions of an organisation to further support product development. Questionnaires and focus group discussion surveys are some of the instruments utilised in market research. In the area of information related work the questions are usually reflective in nature and take the form of: how long does one spend at various information related tasks? What repetitive tasks are performed? What hardware, software and other applications does the organisation utilise etc. Due to their nature the surveys have a broad coverage in terms of the respondents' profession, sector, size of organisation and its maturity with respect to records management. Such surveys provide a snapshot for the sector and are thus valuable resources providing benchmarking opportunities in terms of infrastructure and perspective. Similar surveys tend to be repeated at intervals which also allow the opportunity of trend analysis.

Commercial white papers

Commercial white papers are documents used by businesses as a marketing or sales tool detailing the benefits of particular technologies and products and as such provide a useful resource when assimilating the features of various products during initial investigations into a record keeping solution (for example electronic document and record management (EDRM) systems). As a marketing tool, these papers will naturally highlight information favourable to the company authorising or sponsoring the paper. Such white

papers are often used to generate sales leads, establish thought leadership, make a business case, or to educate customers.

Case Studies

In many respects case studies represent a sub-category of information source as they tend not to appear in their own right but instead can be found contained within academic journals and professional magazines as well as in commercial white papers. A case study is a particular instance or occurrence illustrating a thesis or principle. In the academic journals the case study is more aligned to a research strategy, an empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its real-life context. The case studies appearing in professional magazines tend to have an operational context and are more illustrative, outlining a business decision or dilemma and putting forward a solution. The case study format is also utilised in commercial white papers, here the situation is often presented in the context of a customer organisation and the solution is the product or service provided by the vendor. Again, due to the marketing nature of the commercial white paper, the case study will inevitably tend to highlight information favourable to the vendor organisation.

Analysis of literature

Having established that measuring the benefits of records management is of interest to the sector, what is the current evidence base available to support arguments of the efficiency of the records management function? What follows are a series of statements relating to the current evidence base that we believe to be supported by the literature reviewed during this project.

1. There are records management-specific methodologies available for assessing the impact and effectiveness of records management programmes, but there is currently no commonly accepted methodology for measuring the efficiency of such programmes.

Despite some of the reservations and counter arguments stated above it should be noted that measuring the performance of records management is not an alien concept in the field. The profession's established standards of best practice include guidance on performance measurement, notably 'Performance management for BS ISO 15489-1 (BIP 0025-3:2003)' (Jones, 2003) and 'DIRKS Step H Post implementation review' (NAA, 2001). Via these guides or manuals the concept of measuring the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of the records management programme is introduced. 'Effectiveness' is understood to mean the measure of how the programme performed in meeting its original objective; whilst 'efficiency' is the measure of how the costs of managing the organisation's records compare to before and after the records management initiative. In addition The National Archives has produced a workbook 'Complying with the Records Management Code: Evaluation Workbook and Methodology' (TNA, 2005). The evaluation workbook has been developed to assist public authorities in assessing conformance of their record management systems to the Records Management Code (Great Britain. Department for Constitutional Affairs, 2002). The assessment exercise detailed in this workbook considers more the effectiveness and impact of the records management programme than the efficiency of it; allowing an organisation to show the extent to which good records management is embedded within its infrastructure.

BIP 0025-3:2003 (Jones, 2003) provides a sound introduction to the concept of performance measurement and in Annex B it further provides a list of metrics that measure the impact, effectiveness and efficiency of the records management programme. This list of metrics is suggestive providing a sound starting point and guide for the development of more meaningful measures based around an organisation's particular

business context. The measures detailed cover impact and effectiveness of the management programme in relation to it becoming embedded in the organisation's culture and infrastructure. The metrics for measuring efficiency are, once again, less prominent.

Records management programmes often tend to follow a similar format across organisations, consisting of policy creation, including assigning of responsibilities and authorities; information audit; development of business classification scheme, including retention schedule; and gap analysis of existing record keeping systems. The essence of many of these elements will be the same across most organisations, for example the development and use of a retention schedule will have the same building blocks regardless of the organisation, although the extent of the legislation to be consulted may change depending upon the sector or the organisation. The process of creating a records management policy or carrying out an information audit will also be of similar construction from one organisation to another. The similarity of these elements from one organisation to another may potentially aid the ability to create a commonly applicable generic methodology for monitoring the records management programme's effectiveness with respect to these.

The aspect of the records management programme involving the design of the record keeping system could, however, vary greatly from organisation to organisation. The mechanics of identifying the requirements of such a system may be similar but the resulting solution could vary greatly depending upon where the organisation is in the records management continuum, the complexity of the solution to its records management issues and the resources it has available. For example the metrics to measure the impact and resulting efficiencies of an electronic document management system will be different to the measures used to assess a central physical records store or outsourcing physical storage to a third party. The type of metrics required to measure efficiency could vary greatly from one organisation to another and therefore it would be more problematic to detail these in summary form in a guide. Efficiency as a concept tends to be associated with a process, the time taken for a customer to place an order, for example, or the time taken to update a social care record. Business processes are specific to an organisation; again making it problematic to provide a summary set of metrics to measure the efficiency of such processes.

2. There is comparatively little literature within the records management field relating to the area of benefits and efficiency measurement.

Information relating to the benefits of records management is more prevalent in the professional magazines and commercial white papers than in the academic journals. This is to be expected as the primary focus of the commercial white papers is as a sales or marketing tool and the professional magazines aim to keep the profession informed of changes taking place in the field. As already noted a number of the articles within the professional magazines are written by consultants and vendors in the field and inevitably some of these articles will tend to have a sales feel to them, a position supported by a public comment '*Iron Mountain rep recommending off-site storage for critical records in latest RMS bulletin - no surprise there then. #recordmgmt*' (Schulz, 2009). Where references are made to the efficiencies of records management in the commercial white papers or professional magazines, it is only at a superficial level and certainly does not go into detail of how the efficiencies can be quantified or demonstrated.

As noted earlier there are established performance measurement methodologies embedded in the best practice standards for records management. Where detail of how to monitor performance is described the metrics tend to focus more on the impact and effectiveness of the records management programme rather than its efficiency. There are relatively few articles, if any, relating to the methodology of measuring the

efficiencies of records management and there are no articles detailing empirical data in the academic journals.

From the online survey, for which the results are available in Appendix A, we have found an appetite for quantifying the benefits of records management, with 60% of respondents stating that they have attempted such activities. The main reasons cited for not measuring included little guidance on the type and reliability of metrics available, followed by other priorities and objectives. One respondent who has not attempted to measure benefits commented *'It is an area which worries me as I don't think that accurate and useful monitoring is something which has as yet been addressed by records managers'*. Although performance measurement is addressed in the best practice guides, albeit a light touch on efficiency measurement, detail relating to how to measure has not made it as far as the professional magazines or journals. It should be noted though, that as we move deeper into uncertain economic times articles relating to understanding the return on investment derived from the records management programme are starting to appear in the professional magazines. The discussion is starting to happen, but it is far from the point of providing sound methodologies to address the measurement of efficiencies. This is an interesting point and coupled with a further reason from a respondent to our online survey who has not attempted measuring benefits *'The organisation's prime focus for records management is regulatory compliance'* gives an insight as to why methodologies relating to quantifying efficiency gains are lacking in the literature. This suggests that there has been a reliance on the compliance aspect of records management and in the good economic times of the past ten years there has been little demand for a cost and benefit assessment of the records management programme.

Follow up interviews from the online survey indicated that organisations were making use of performance measures to assess the impact and effectiveness of records management initiatives within their organisations. In addition to assessing the effectiveness of the records management function, such metrics can also be utilised in the preparation of business cases for further records management activities. For example a nuclear fuel provider used metrics regarding the frequency with which records stored in a central store are retrieved. These metrics were used to decide the strategy for storing records, for those used infrequently, it would be more economic to move to deep storage with an offsite provider and for those accessed frequently by a number of departments, it would be more economic to digitise and store electronically. In addition to informing an organisation of how effective a records management programme is performing, these frequency count metrics have also been utilised in deriving cost avoidance information to support business decisions.

3. Traditionally the majority of benefits used to support business cases for investment in records management are of an intangible nature.

As mentioned in the previous section in recent years regulatory compliance has been seen as a key vehicle for promoting the need for records management, increasingly joined over the past year by the ever-growing profile of information security (particularly in relation to personal data) . As Willis (2005, pp.86-97) states *'Information and records management is a vital element of corporate governance which in turn underpins the survival of political institutions and economic entities alike, by delivering transparency, accountability, due process demonstration of compliance, meeting legal obligations and ensuring security.'*

This has certainly been true in the last ten years where the key drivers for records management programmes have been legislation and corporate governance, particularly as the Section 46 Code (DCA, 2002) intrinsically links records management to compliance. Articles relating to compliance appear in both

the professional magazines and journals with great frequency and will continue to do so as the legislation continues to change. The benefits derived from good corporate governance are generally thought to be intangible (that is not easily measurable) although the literature does include reference to measures concerning how effective the records management programme is, which can be used as a measurable indication of standards of corporate governance. Notably the 'Complying with the Records Management Code: Evaluation Workbook and Methodology' (TNA, 2005) produced by the National Archives provides a yard stick to measure records management functions that support good corporate governance.

In recent times, particularly in the area of IT projects, intangible benefits have generally become more prevalent in the business case methodology and this has also been the case in the area of records management, particularly functions that require technological solutions. Cimtech (2009, p.64) put forward that *'Indeed, the strategic benefits are often vital and hence outweigh any tactical considerations.'*

Based at the University of Glasgow, [The espida Project](#) (University of Glasgow, 2007) has developed a methodology to support the process of creating business cases for information technology proposals that may offer more intangible benefits rather than immediate financial benefits to an organisation. The methodology assists project proposers to tease out the benefits that arise from information projects.

Clearly a balance needs to be struck between the weight given to the intangible and tangible benefits within a business case for records management but this is not a balance that we have hitherto detected in the literature which over the past decade has tended to focus far more on the intangible benefits likely to be accrued.

4. The majority of the available evidence supporting efficiency gains is often of a nebulous nature and is not supported by accessible, independent empirical data.

As already noted the profession's best practice standards subscribe to measuring the efficiencies of the records management programme, but there is little available methodology documented to support such activity. Statements concerning efficiency are repeatedly made in the literature, more so in the professional magazines and vendor information than the academic journals. The statements are often articulated in terms of improvements such as decreased storage space or reduced turnaround times for fulfilling customer orders. The statements tend to be general or tenuous (or both), an example would be:

'By replacing the manual filing, retrieval, photocopying and postage of key financial documents with electronic processes, the business also cuts costs, frees-up document storage space and ultimately, runs more efficiently.' (Records Management Society Bulletin, 2008, p.13)

The efficiency claimed may appear to be obvious from the context of the statement, but there is no reference to the extent of the efficiency, nor is there any consideration of the costs taken to achieve this benefit. Without quantifying the statement the magnitude of the claimed efficiency gain cannot be appreciated. Statements of this form alone would not further strengthen a records management business case which may be heavily reliant on intangible benefits such as corporate governance, but regardless seem to be used and reused frequently within the records management literature.

As we have already alluded to, the efficiency of a records management programme is very much aligned to the context of the organisation within which it is operating. This is echoed in the literature as the magnitude of efficiency gains tend to be illustrated in case study articles, rather than in a general 'standalone' piece. An example would be: *'... reduced document storage space requirements by 70 percent, and order fulfilment time by 80 percent.'* (Xerox, 2005).

The percentage figure alone is not sufficient to appreciate the magnitude; the context of the wider article will need to establish this. In the above example the case study provides details of existing storage dimensions, 12,000 square foot, giving context to the 70%; the text also describes details of the storage issues the client company was facing and how the solution the vendor provided benefited the organisation.

Such case studies are useful to appreciate the potential benefits of various records management initiatives and can provide a guide as to how to communicate the potential benefits of records management initiatives to the organisation. Unfortunately, details as to what measurements were included and how the statistics were derived do not tend to be provided. Such detail would be of great benefit in adding evidential weight to these claims as well as in assisting practitioners in developing metrics or assessing potential benefits within their own organisations.

Within the literature, in more general pieces the potential benefits of records management initiatives are illustrated with statistics that are frequently based on industry surveys. The industry surveys are often based on questions that are reflective: asking the respondent to reflect and give their opinion as to how they carry out information related tasks and how long they *think* they spend on them. The survey information provides a snapshot of industry opinions and perceptions of various issues relating to records, information, knowledge and content management.

The reasons for adopting such an approach are easy to understand. Surveys and questionnaires are a well established, relatively cheap way of gathering information on a particular subject – especially when seeking to understand the views and opinions of a large number of individuals. In the absence of any other established methodologies for gathering data on process performance prior to and after the implementation of records management improvements there may also appear to be little choice other than to ask the opinions of those involved.

However, there are clearly also significant limitations implicit with ‘data’ gathered in this way. How long people *think* they spend filing (for example) may vary considerably from how long they *actually* spend filing. Activities such as filing or searching for information are, unless very carefully defined; open to a considerable degree of interpretation. For some transferring an email from their inbox to a subject folder may count as a filing activity whereas others may think only of the formal addition of new information to a registered file as being relevant. Plus, we should also recognise that for most people, activities such as filing and searching for information count as ‘background tasks’, part and parcel of modern office life and not, therefore, something they give much consideration to. As such, any retrospective musings as to how long it takes or how frequently they are performed are likely to be vague at best. The fact that these tasks also take the form of ‘chores’ for many may also inadvertently steer them towards an overestimate of the amount of time it takes (or ‘wastes’ in their eyes) during the day. Lastly of course it is possible that the recipient of the questionnaire may have their own reasons for wishing to interpret and respond to the survey in particular ways: perhaps they hope that stating a high figure for the amount of time ‘wasted’ during these tasks will add weight to their argument for extra administrative help within their department, or view it as a convenient means of blaming ‘the system’ for failure to achieve targets etc.

None of these are reasons not to undertake such reflective, user-focused data collection. Indeed user-perception may have an important role to play in terms of measuring ‘user satisfaction’ with any improvement undertaken. How popular a new system or process is with those who use it and how successful it is *perceived* by them to be can be almost as important to know as how successful it has *actually* been (particularly when both sets of data are combined) but it should be noted that they are

different and that we should be careful of applying the same weight of evidence on user surveys as on empirical data derived from an accurate and repeatable process.

There are also cases within some of the literature where statistics are quoted but no further reference to support the origin of the information is cited. Without provenance the information provided lacks weight and substance and common sense suggests that it should therefore be used with caution. References provide the opportunity to explore the theory behind the statistical information detailed, thus allowing a meaningful consideration of the information presented and enables a more informed comparison to one's own organisation.

Unfortunately, all too often within the records management literature – particularly within the magazines of professional bodies such as the Records Management Society's *Bulletin* - many of the references quoted are incomplete and cannot be used to trace the source information. Articles written in the past year quoting statistics such as *'The average document gets copied 19 times in its life'*, *'7.5% of all documents get lost'* and *'\$20 to file a document'* all quote 'Coopers & Lybrand' as the source. (Questys Solutions, 2007). The reference does not specifically identify the source document so further appraisal of the information is difficult. This citation is of particular interest as it is repeatedly referenced within the literature. However the source it refers to (if, indeed, it ever existed) could be anything from 11 years to 20 years old. Certainly, despite significant efforts by the authors it has not been possible to locate the report in question. Such statements that cannot withstand further scrutiny weaken the literature available and the records management profession's continued reliance on them despite their obvious flaws does its professional credentials no favours.

As Asprey (2004, pp.34-41) states rather succinctly in his opinion piece: *'Industry analysts, product suppliers and systems integrators often publish statistical information, about the average time spent by people locating information within organisations, and the benefits of enabling systems. These statistics might prove helpful when building the business case, but the methods used to derive the statistics may also need to be examined. Practitioners need to determine whether the analyses are relevant to the specific enterprise, and whether the statistics can be qualified and quantified.'*

5. Benefit in relation to records management tend to be documented within the available literature far more than costs.

The vendor material, whether it is a white paper, case study or article in a professional magazine often contains pockets of information relating to the efficiency gains their products can provide to an organisation. The figures where provided are specific to a particular vendor product or customer organisation and are stated in general terms, for example, a 70% reduction in storage space. The information provided in the vendor material is illustrative of the benefits possible but does not express costs within the same context so it is difficult to assess the overall economic impact of the benefits stated. Cost details tend to be absent from information sources such as commercial white papers or vendor authored articles which is, perhaps, to be expected as these are promotional vehicles highlighting the benefits of a particular product but nevertheless makes it difficult to achieve a true indication of the degree of the benefits realised.

A key finding of a recent survey (Miles, 2009) indicated that compared with recent years, cost savings has taken a clear lead over compliance as the main business driver for investment in document and records management. Although this survey primarily concerned enterprise content management (ECM) implementations in the organisation such statements could easily carry across to records management in

general. Due to the changing economic climate investment in records management programmes will now undoubtedly be subject to more economic scrutiny than in previous years.

Johnston and Bowen (2005, pp.131-140) in a piece regarding the benefits relating to electronic document and records management systems concluded that *'The benefits have rarely been measured carefully; studies in which benefits and costs are reported in detail would be valuable.'* Unfortunately relatively little detailed information relating to either benefits or costs associated with EDRMS implementations have been made publicly available since that time.

6. There are various general methodologies available for calculating project costs, however details relating to costs are largely absent from the available literature in relation to records management.

In order to assess the economic impact of records management an appreciation of the costs involved in carrying out activities is required. Saffady (ARMA International, 1998) acknowledged the evolving skills sets of the records manager and brought together standard management cost analysis concepts and methods and presented them within a records management context. This resource primarily focuses on quantifying costs associated with a records management initiative; it introduces the concept of return on investment, but here the focus is on cost avoidance rather than quantifying the benefits.

In addition there are articles within the professional magazines that also tackle the concept of return on investment and these have become more prevalent with the development of technologies that require large investment of resources.

Allen (2007, pp.34-41), states that *'Determining the ROI for a significant investment, such as adopting an ECM or BPM system is no easy task'* and goes on to state that *'Developing effective ROI models should include the impact of implementing such solutions on both costs and revenues.'* Allen outlines considerations to include in assessing the return on investment between a digital and paper-based filing system. In addition to cost avoidance, Allen mentions efficiency gains as a valid part of the business case, but the piece does not go into the detail as to how to measure such gains.

Asprey (2004, pp.34-41) in his opinion piece advocates the use of professionals within an organisation to assist in the development of a business case suggesting that where appropriate information professionals should utilise the organisation's resources such as management accountants for return on investment calculations, or IT managers for assistance with technical aspects of a records management solution. This approach not only avoids the dangers of working in 'silos' but is also tacit acknowledgement that records managers do not and should not be expected to have expertise in all the facets of the roles they must play and that instead of merely attempting to do the best they can, suggests that there may be advantages to collaborating with, and using, fellow professionals with true expertise in these areas.

Ashley (2000, pp.140-149) found a lack of costing models available for the costing of digital records management and put forward suggestions as to what such a model could possibly include. In April 2005 ['The LIFE Project'](#) (University College London, British Library, JISC, 2007), which aims to apply the theory of life cycle collection management to digital collections, commenced. An output of the project developed a methodology to calculate the long-term costs and future requirements of digital assets. The model uses a life cycle approach to costing, a model that is used in many industries as a cost management or product development tool. The project also provides case study information to support the LIFE costing model and the project continues to refine the model using real case study data.

7. There is perceived value in aligning measured benefits with agreed strategic goals.

The literature suggests there is a benefit to matching the objectives of a records management programme with the strategic objectives of an organisation. Hare and Mcleod (1997, p.20) assert that *'The records management programme provides an implementation tool but it needs to be managed at a strategic level and it will only be successful if it is aligned with the aims and objectives of the organisation to which it refers.'*

The literature also supports that articulating the benefits of records management in terms of the strategic aims of the organisation can prove beneficial in communicating the benefits to senior management. In his opinion piece Asprey (2004, pp.7-13) expresses concern that *'record keeping strategies are often compliance and technology focused rather than business driven'* and advocates the aligning of the objectives of the records management programme to organisation objectives stating *'This may improve the prospects of identifying and realising measurable benefits and underpin the value proposition for securing business case funding.'*

Aligning the objectives of the records management programme with the organisation's strategic objectives not only provides suggestions of how to quantify the benefits but also provides a language that senior management is familiar with, which further contributes to the notion of the *'selling of records management'* that Jones (2003, p.6) touches on.

Allio (2006, pp.255-263) critiques the budget focused approach to performance measurement and also advocates aligning the metric with strategy, thus allowing the organisation to identify and reward strategic behaviour *'Good metrics facilitate implementation of strategy; poor misaligned ones impede implementation.'*

[The espida Project](#) (University of Glasgow, 2007) also utilises the concept of aligning the benefits of projects with strategic aims to assist in articulating the intangible benefits of a project.

One records management team, interviewed by the authors, at a county council which was looking to reallocate a number of business units in satellite offices into the main council buildings successfully took advantage of this organisational objective by showcasing the benefits associated with records management in the following way.

By applying records management principles, e.g.:

- applying retention schedules to existing physical paper stores and keeping only records that are required;
- moving hardcopy records from office space to the county council's main record store; and
- moving to electronic record storage, on a central server, rather than in hard copy form;

the county council were able to demonstrate a reduction in the office space required by the business units when relocating into the main office buildings.

The county council elected to illustrate the benefits by equating the volume of physical records that were no longer required to the dimensions of a standard staff workstation. This measurement provides a visual representation and a clear message to senior management looking to reduce the office space required by the business unit moving into the main county council buildings. The records management team indicated that communicating the benefits of records management in terms of current organisational objectives increased senior management's awareness of the records management function and assisted in the team putting forward a business case for an increase in resources to manage the county council's central store.

8. There is clearly a strong appetite for empirical data within the UK records management profession.

The results of the online survey, available in Appendix A, showed that information relating to the costs and tangible benefits of investment in improving records management is being derived within organisations for internal consumption. Internal networks such as email distribution lists and local records management groups share information and experiences demonstrating an appetite for understanding the impact understanding the impact and costs associated with records management initiatives.

60% of participants to the online survey indicated that they had attempted to measure the impact of introducing records management within the organisation. The main reasons stated for *not* measuring are difficulties in finding metrics that are based in fact and that are fair (36%) and shortage of resources, time and other priorities (28%).

According to respondents to the survey the types of Initiatives where measurements were made included hardcopy storage (internal/external) (27%), introduction of a corporate file plan (24%), implementation of an EDRM system (22%) and appraisal/disposal exercises (20%).

Approximately 26% of those measuring benefits do so, on an ongoing, recurring basis. A further 15% measured immediately after the project completion and on an annual basis whilst 43% did not respond to the question.

Promoting the value of the records management function was the main reason cited for measuring the benefits at 33% of responses made. A requirement as part of a business case and to strengthen future business cases came next with 27% and 24% respectively; 16% of the responses stated regular departmental monitoring as the main driver.

The main difficulties encountered when trying to measure the impact of records management initiatives was choice of metric with 55% of responses. Issues relating to choosing the right metric for the right job, choosing a metric that was robust and data collection were also cited. Twenty per cent cited issues relating to buy-in from staff and senior management and differentiating this from the impact of the records management initiative.

Forty six per cent of respondents indicated that they had been asked to provide total project costs for a records management initiative. The initiatives in question were similar to those where attempts had been made to assess the impact of the records management function.

Of those who indicated that they had calculated costs, 51% indicated that this was in order to demonstrate a return on investment for the proposed records management initiative.

The results from this survey support other indicators that the measurement of costs and benefits and the appetite for empirical data to support the case for investing in records management is already considerable and continuing to grow. Of the 61 delegates who responded to the evaluation of our *'Building Bridges: the connective power of records and information management'* conference held in March 2009, 88.5% indicated that they would either definitely or possibly be interested in hearing more about or potentially participating in the current project of which this literature review forms part (JISC infoNet, 2009). Whilst during the same evaluation and feedback for this conference 12 of the 43 delegates who answered the question "what could/should JISC infoNet be doing to support the development of records management within your institution?" made specific reference to this project, its perceived importance and the anticipated value of its outputs. The following quote from one delegate provides a good summary of the

apparent appetite for material in this area: *'I think the output of the current project; if it provides data to demonstrate tangible benefits of RM in HE will be invaluable'*.

It is also interesting to note that July 2009 has seen the first commercial training courses in this area aimed specifically at records managers with the launch of Tribal's *'Benefits Analysis in Turbulent Times: How to quantify the cashable cost savings of effective information and records management'*.

Conclusion

Measurement should be and increasingly needs to be an intrinsic element of records management. This does not mean to say that every benefit that records management delivers (or claims to deliver) need necessarily be empirically measurable, nor that we should limit the scope of our professional activities to only those benefits that are. For as the literature tells us 'intangible' benefits, particularly those relating to legal and regulatory compliance, accountability and standards of corporate governance, continue to occupy a prominent place in our professional arsenal and are likely to for the foreseeable future. The question is less whether these should play a lesser role; more whether in focusing so intently on such drivers we have inadvertently relegated the importance of achieving 'tangible' benefits to a dangerously low level.

The literature consulted during this report paints an interesting and at times rather contradictory picture. Certainly the professional standards which could be said to underpin notions of what constitutes 'best practice' in the profession are unequivocal about the importance of the records management function being able to quantify the benefits it makes to an organisation and measure its impact in unambiguous (if not empirical) terms. A casual glance at the professional literature would also seem to support the notion that this need is already recognised and being addressed. For if there are few articles, papers or other sources directly related to questions of benefits realisation and measurement a large number of broadly relevant sources are peppered with impressive sounding statements, figures and statistics – many of which will be familiar to and perhaps oft-quoted by most practicing records managers. But scratch beneath the surface and the fragility of much of this apparent 'evidence base' soon becomes apparent. Data which is stated, quoted and re-quoted with such astonishing regularity within the literature that one would be forgiven for mistaking them as absolute truths often appears upon closer examination to consist of little more than partial conjecture and opinion allowing no means of further verification.

It is, of course, quite likely – and indeed the survey undertaken as part of this study confirms this likelihood – that reliable data regarding the costs and benefits of improving records management does exist but remains inaccessible within the organisation that commissioned or gathered it. This is inevitable given the nature of much of the data (relating as it does to matters of organisational efficiency and intended only for an internal audience) but does give hope that such measurement is possible in this field and that an appetite for it exists. This should not come as a surprise. For even in times of plenty senior managers within any organisation should always have at least one eye on costs. Investment decisions need to be made based on reliable data and if records management is unable to provide it there is a clear risk that management may instead choose to back perceived 'safer bets' that offer a more certain return on investment. In an economic downturn these trends are likely to be further exacerbated. Records management may well find itself in a precarious position and viewed either (according to the evidence available and the attitudes of those involved) as part of the problem or part of the solution when it comes to administrative overheads, bureaucracy and 'red tape'. With access to the right data to prove efficiency, return on investment and benefits realisation the arguments in favour of continued (even increased)

investment in records management should be strengthened. But in the absence of such data records management is vulnerable: an unknown quantity and a luxury which can no longer be afforded. Even arguments which previously seemed untouchable such as legal compliance may now be a harder 'sell' if that is the only perceived benefit.

The conclusions of this report confirm that there is both a need for, and a current lack of, reliable evidence to demonstrate the tangible benefits of investing in records management. Hopefully this is something that the remaining outputs from this project will help address.

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Further additional reading is available at <http://delicious.com/JISCinfoNetRIM>

Appendix A: Online Survey Results

To establish to what extent organisations are assessing the economic benefit of records management within their organisation a survey was conducted from May 29th to June 12th 2009. The survey was conducted online and distributed via key email distribution groups for records managers and made available via the JISC infoNet website. A total of 77 responses were received.

Have you ever tried to measure the impact of introducing records management within your organisation using empirical and quantifiable metrics? (N=77)

Yes: 46

No: 31

The main reasons provided for not doing so are:

| | |
|---|----|
| Difficult to find metrics that are based in fact and fair | 14 |
| Resources/Time | 8 |
| Early stages of records management development | 7 |
| Other | 5 |
| Other priorities | 3 |
| Efficiency not core objective/Regulatory compliance | 2 |

What was the primary nature of the records management initiative(s) that you measured? (N=46)

| | |
|---|----|
| Hardcopy Storage (Internal/External) | 11 |
| Corporate File plan | 10 |
| Electronic document and records management system | 9 |
| Appraisal/Disposal | 8 |
| Other | 3 |

When did you collect the data to measure the impact of the initiative? (N=46)

| | |
|---|----|
| On an ongoing, recurring basis (e.g. annual monitoring) | 12 |
| Once only immediately following project completion | 4 |
| Both (annually and post completion) | 7 |

What was the purpose of the measurement? (N=46)

| | |
|--|----|
| Regular organisational/departmental financial monitoring | 11 |
| Required as part of the business case | 18 |
| To help promote the value of the records management function | 22 |
| To strengthen future business cases | 16 |

What were the main difficulties that you encountered trying to measure the impact of the records management initiative?

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Choice of metric | 11 |
| Staff buy in/resistance to change | 2 |
| Senior management buy in | 2 |
| Other | 5 |

Have you ever been asked to calculate the total project costs for a records management initiative that you have proposed? (N=77)

Yes: 35

No: 27

No response: 15

The projects were similar to question 1.

What costs did you include within your calculations? (N=27)

| | |
|--|----|
| RM staff costs | 23 |
| Software (including licences) | 21 |
| Equipment | 21 |
| Services (e.g. consultants, training providers etc) | 21 |
| Hardware | 20 |
| Facilities (e.g. storage or office accommodation) | 20 |
| Consumables (e.g. storage boxes, printer cartridges etc) | 16 |
| Participating staff costs | 15 |
| Other | 4 |

Were you asked to calculate the costs in order to demonstrate a return on investment for your proposed records management initiative? (N = 35)

Yes: 18

No: 7

No response: 10

Was the proposal in question eventually funded? (N=28)

Yes: 25

No: 3

If you had access to empirical data demonstrating the impact and potential return on investment of a range of records management initiatives, which of the following initiatives would you like to see such data for? (N=77) (Figure 11)

| | |
|--|----|
| System implementation (e.g. EDRMS, Sharepoint etc) | 24 |
| Business classification scheme/File plan development | 21 |
| Conversion of paper to digital records | 21 |
| Appraisal & disposal exercises | 20 |
| Records management policy | 19 |
| Use of commercial storage | 16 |
| Corporate file naming convention | 12 |
| Other (please specify) | 6 |