

Book Reviews

The No-Nonsense Guide to Archives and Recordkeeping

MARGARET CROCKETT

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This book does exactly “what it says on the tin”, a no-nonsense guide to archives and recordkeeping.

The target audience is for people working in records and archives management, those who manage them, and for those people in associated information management professions, such as librarians, museum curators and IT professionals. The introduction states that the book is written for “*especially those without formal training*” and this underlines its highly practical approach. Yet, just as watching a Harry Potter film makes more sense after you have read the book, I would hesitate to recommend this book to a complete records or archives novice as, despite clear explanations, some experience and familiarity with concepts is required for both context and application. Conversely, seasoned practitioners will not find anything new in the text, but the checklists and tables are valuable sources for training material – reflecting, no doubt, that the book is based on the training days run by the author and her business partner.

Covering a record’s journey from creation through its lifecycle to eventual destruction or preservation in the archives, the book is divided into five chapters and each has useful checklists, exercises, case studies and diagrams to aid understanding.

The first chapter explores the concepts behind managing records and archives. After a whistle-stop tour through key terminology, record media and format (how I wish we had tally sticks in our Archive!), some time is spent looking at the different types of archive repository, professional associations and training, and concludes with a useful summary of records and archives from both the creators and users perspectives – but still left me wanting a glossary for ease of reference through the rest of the book.

Managing current records, the second chapter, covers recordkeeping to support current business or organisations, i.e. active records, and considers characteristics of a record, filing, classification, metadata (though only discussed briefly – and this is an omission), naming, security, and vital records. For the uninitiated Crockett also provides professional

observations, which can be verified by legions of records managers. Her comments on filing had me nodding in complete agreement: “...*probably one of the most underestimated and undervalued activities...often given to the most junior person in the office, and not infrequently given to temporary staff, neither of whom are best placed to understand the work or the filing system...risking misfiling and missing records.*” So true!

Chapter three examines Records management, with an emphasis on the ‘management’. Being a UK publication, the author uses a ‘lifecycle’ lens, rather than the Continuum methodology we tend to utilise in New Zealand and Australia leading to some divergent approaches. That said, Crockett provides an interesting comparison between information, records and archives management, and dissects a recordkeeping programme down to its component parts in order to better plan an implementation. However, the 11 point checklist for implementing an electronic records management system may possibly be oversimplifying what for most organisations is a pretty major and complex project.

Archives management and preservation are covered in the last two chapters. The former has a very good section on collecting policies, and provides the basics for arrangement and description and access. The latter considers storage and environmental conditions, disaster prevention and emergency planning.

Although Crockett states that the “*guidance is format-neutral*”, and for the principle and concept based commentary and advice it is, but there is a bias in favour of hard-copy. Digital records and the challenges they provide information professionals, was addressed, but in a cursory way, and one which did little justice to the prevalence that born-digital materials now have in both records and archives holdings. Likewise little mention was made of digitisation, so important as a tool for access, surrogacy, dissemination, and preservation.

While the book is full of good practical advice, the layout is not conducive for a ‘how-to’ guide – font too small, not enough white space, and pictures would help reinforce the points being made, as well as breaking up the rather sterile format. However, there is an excellent index – but, again, in a tiny font!

With lots of tips and options, the book provides a useful resource to dip into, and, when augmented with experience and/or advice from seasoned colleagues, could find a place as a useful staple on the beginners bookshelf, though with the warning that it is written for a UK rather than a New Zealand audience.

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