

Usage of Recordkeeping Systems: A Question of Trust

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An organisation's or community's information culture is one of the facets for analysis identified in the re-conceptualisation of records management as recordkeeping informatics.¹ Some features of information culture are very resistant to change, others are more susceptible to modification. The trust that users have in recordkeeping systems has been acknowledged as a characteristic of an organisation's information culture, furthermore one that is very open to influence by records managers.² The extent to which records managers are aware of this phenomenon though has not been explored in any depth. The research reported in this paper attempted to investigate records managers' awareness of trust issues in the New Zealand public sector and in particular to find out

Whether records managers perceive that lack of trust impacts on employee use of recordkeeping systems

The strategies that records managers implement to encourage employee use of recordkeeping systems

The paper begins with a review of the literature which has discussed the human behavioural issues encountered when implementing recordkeeping systems, with a particular focus on trust. This is followed by the presentation and discussion of findings from an online survey of records managers in the New Zealand public sector.

People and Recordkeeping Systems

Although the focus of much of the records management literature is on systems, standards and techniques, it has also been acknowledged that people, the users of our systems, play a significant role in information management.^{3,4,5} Looking back over two decades of managing electronic records, McLeod and Childs⁶ found that successful records management is still a problem for many organisations. McLeod and Childs used the Cynefin framework to test data from an empirical research project that investigated strategies for improving electronic records management. The data had been gathered from participants around the world, in

research conducted over a period of years. They concluded that the people issues around electronic data management can be managed, but that understanding the nature of the issues is vital to selecting the right approaches to tackling them.

The foundations of human society are built on trust,⁷ and we could not conduct our modern lives without trust; however, it is a difficult concept to define. One definition of trust from the Oxford Dictionary⁸ is the “firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something.” Huotari and Iivonen⁹ summarize their findings about trust by stating that

trust is based on expectations and interaction
trust manifests in people’s behavioral patterns
trust makes a difference

They go on to explain that because trust is based on people’s expectations it is necessary to understand these expectations to build a trusting relationship.

Trust is a fluid concept,¹⁰ with the general notion being an assumption that your expectations will be fulfilled: trust is necessary for us to cope with the complexities of daily life. The sociologist Nooteboom¹¹ believes that trust is not all-or-nothing, that there are degrees of trust, and that these degrees of trust are difficult or impossible to measure. He explains that it is natural for people to have two frames of mind; because humans have an instinct for survival and the guarding of our resources, as well as an inclination to be a loyal member of a community. The frame of mind depends on the individual, their character, experience and circumstances.

Records are instruments of trust as well as objects of trust in themselves,¹² and we need to be able to trust records to be authoritative enough to support or deny actions.¹³ To ensure effective recordkeeping, Oliver and Foscarini¹⁴ tell us: “We need to not only make sure that our systems are trustworthy, but also make sure that our users too share that trust.”

There is no silver bullet for electronic records management and the full impact of the system chosen will only become apparent over time, sometimes with unanticipated or undesirable consequences.¹⁵ In a study of human computer interaction it was found that maintaining the trustworthiness of the systems was crucial to keep the user willing to interact with the system.¹⁶ Various strategies have been identified and discussed in the professional recordkeeping literature to promote the use

of recordkeeping systems, including support, training, and encouraging senior management leadership.

Support for end-users is essential¹⁷ to overcome uncertainty, and training and communication are tools that can help overcome users' resistance. The importance of training has been noted repeatedly^{18,19,20} as a factor in compliance in recordkeeping, and particularly with regard to EDRMS systems. Training is also seen as a way to allay fears.²¹ Formal training is not always effective and Oliver and Foscarini stress that training must be sustainable, and should be designed in accordance with user needs.²²

The role of management, especially senior management in promoting recordkeeping, has been strongly emphasized in the literature and their support is considered vital²³ to the success of a records management programme.

McDonald²⁴ identifies the main cause of user resistance to engage with recordkeeping systems as a failure to identify and define work processes. He also identifies the lack of understanding of the benefits of a system, lack of user friendliness, lack of integration with other technologies and inadequate approaches to classification and retrieval, as contributing factors. Similarly, Johnston and Bowen²⁵ state that the notion of trust is important in that although an electronic document and records management system (EDRMS) can be trusted to ensure that records are authentic and reliable, a key element to successful implementation is user acceptance.

One of the key findings from recent research into electronic records management has acknowledged that 'records professionals may be part of the problem as well as part of the solution'.²⁶ Barbara Reed²⁷ has also noted that recordkeeping professionals can be resistant to change, focusing on the system rather than the changing needs of the information environment. A study of our cognate profession, librarianship, found that the greatest challenge to transforming library services lay in transforming the knowledge, skills and abilities of library staff, and to overcome a traditionally conservative mindset.²⁸ Hence it was considered important to investigate the perceptions of records managers, and in so doing help raise awareness of the dimension of the user aspect relating to trust.

The Survey

An online survey was developed in order to investigate issues relating to trust present in the New Zealand public sector. Questions aimed to elicit

records managers' perceptions and also to probe the areas identified from the literature as having a possible impact on trust: management support and training. The survey was piloted by three individuals with a recordkeeping background who would not qualify as part of the survey population. This testing resulted in increased clarity of some questions. Invitations to participate were sent out via the nzrecords electronic mailing list in March 2014. The survey was restricted to records managers in agencies subject to the Public Records Act 2005 (PRA). This group was chosen because of the legal obligations to create and maintain records by public sector employees, in accordance with PRA requirements. The first 12 questions required tick box answers: respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement to statements by selecting answers from a five point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The final three questions aimed to collect qualitative data.

Forty-two responses were received, of which 39 were complete. While this number may not appear large, it is similar to the number of organisations (43) audited in the most recent audit round by Archives New Zealand (2014) thus can be considered to represent a meaningful sample of the New Zealand public sector.

Findings

The records managers responding to the survey were generally positive about their recordkeeping systems, with 27 (69%) agreeing that their system was successful, 6 (15%) disagreeing and with the remainder undecided. Although still positive, there was slightly less confidence expressed about employees' attitudes, with 23 (59%) agreeing that employees trusted the recordkeeping system, 8 (21%) disagreeing, and the remainder undecided. Significantly, the majority of records managers (29 or 74%) agreed that lack of trust impacts on employee use of the system.

The next three questions probed the situation with regard to user training. Only 18 (46%) of respondents considered that employees had received sufficient training in their recordkeeping system, 12 (31%) were undecided and 9 (23%) disagreed. Perhaps not surprisingly, only 15 (39%) considered that employees in their organisations felt confident using the recordkeeping system. A similarly gloomy perspective was taken of employees' understanding of the importance of effective recordkeeping, with only 17 individuals (44%) agreeing that was the case.

Other questions explored the role of management. Thirty respondents (77%) considered their manager understood and trusted

the recordkeeping system, with only slightly fewer (29) agreeing that their manager actively promoted its use. However, subsequent responses to the qualitative questions indicated that this positive view of management applied only to the respondents' line managers, and not managers overall in the organisation (see discussion). Almost all (38 or 97%) of respondents agreed that management attitudes affect employee compliance in recordkeeping, with just one person undecided.

Respondents were asked whether they considered changes in recordkeeping systems to be a factor in influencing trust. Twenty-five (64%) respondents agreed, while 8 (21%) were undecided and 6 (15%) disagreed. When asked if employees' confidence in the recordkeeping system helped them to comply with the aims of the PRA, only 16 (41%) agreed, 20 (51%) were undecided and 3 (8%) disagreed. The last tick box question asked whether respondents thought employees were confident that they would be able to retrieve information added to the recordkeeping system in five years time. Twenty-two (56%) agreed, 10 (26%) were undecided, with 7 (18%) disagreeing.

The final three questions provided the opportunity for respondents to talk about their strategies and to comment on trust issues. The first asked records managers to nominate their most effective strategy to promote trust in their organisation's recordkeeping system. Almost all (36) responded, several with more than one strategy. Ongoing support, demonstration of effectiveness of the system, and training and communication were mentioned by most. Rapid response to problems was mentioned as fostering trust, as were automating the system to enable PRA compliance, and ensuring that the systems are embedded into business processes and the way people work. The use of recordkeeping champions, or peer pressure, was also found to be effective by some.

The next question looked to identify any symptoms of lack of trust. Respondents were asked about ways employees had found to bypass recordkeeping systems. The 36 records managers who answered this question listed a variety of personal 'hoarding of information' methods amongst staff. These included saving records to desktops, saving to shared or personal drives, using the cloud, using USB sticks and external hard drives, as well as email. Some, more adventurously, were altering classification structure and changing metadata. Only one respondent stated that any bypassing of the system would be unethical, and was unlikely to be deliberate.

The final question asked for any further comments. Some issues with management were noted, and several respondents commented on

the contrast between the length of time necessary to build trust, and the rapidity with which it can be lost.

Discussion

Findings from this survey show that New Zealand records managers in the public sector do identify lack of trust in recordkeeping systems as a barrier to effective recordkeeping, although the extent of this varies from one organisation to another. Most respondents felt that their recordkeeping system was adequate, but fewer felt it was trusted by staff, and even fewer felt staff trusted it for long-term retrieval. Various factors were seen as contributing to user trust: management attitudes and support were identified as crucial, as were training, communication and on-going support. Less than half of the respondents felt that their staff understood the importance of efficient recordkeeping. While most respondents found that changes in systems could be a factor in loss of trust, several disagreed. A variety of hoarding of information methods were identified as well as a variety of ways to encourage trust and achieve compliance.

Most respondents were positive about their systems overall, and indicated their systems were successful. Despite this, 74% of respondents felt that lack of trust did have an impact on staff use of the system. To alleviate this situation it is important to find the factors that contribute to the building and destruction of trust in recordkeeping systems. Several records managers noted that trust is slow to build and that there is no silver bullet:

“People will trust what can be demonstrated to work efficiently”

“If the system is perceived as unstable, then there is a natural reluctance to take the risk of adding your work”.

“I think fixing bugs and errors is the most important. If people experience ongoing issues and these are not remedied it is a permanent barrier to usage”

Survey findings support observations from the literature relating to the role of management^{29,30,31} with almost all respondents agreeing that attitudes from management affect employee compliance in recordkeeping. Respondents felt so strongly about the role of senior management that they took the opportunity to comment further:

“Employee trust will be reduced if they do not see management using the system effectively ... Inconsistency hampers the message that the

system can be trusted."

"If the head of the organisation & management level are supportive of recordkeeping systems in a regular and direct way, the employees will be. Everything starts from the top."

"Getting visible support from top level management has been patchy, where we get the support we see major strides forward, where we don't, the work is harder."

Frustrations with limited support from management show with comments like:

"All attempts to add specific requirements to performance assessment systems strongly resisted by managers. Generic statements about staff being required to use corporate systems as required are never enforced, and the worst offenders are often managers."

"If the leadership team don't stress the importance of record keeping procedures then staff will find themselves too busy to comply."

Other responses sharing successful strategies noted "strong and proactive support from senior and middle management" and "responsible recordkeeping is visibly supported by top tier managers and directors".

When asked about successful strategies most respondents mentioned training and communicating as effective strategies for increasing trust, but also emphasized the need for ongoing training and support:

"One to one inductions for all users of the recordkeeping system, including casual and contract people, by the records manager. Further assistance is available at any time that is convenient to the user."

"Engage with people who have concerns. Whether you can solve the issues quickly or not, fronting up and communicating is most often appreciated and fosters trust."

Another recommended "delivering 'tiny tips' along the way - never overloading with too much information at once."

Others commented on inadequate training:

"We do not do enough training and refresher education ... many do need refreshers on how the system works so they can gain trust."

"Most organisations I have worked in have limited resource with which to provide training and end user support."

Informal training, in the form of records champions, was a strategy some found successful.

A link between confidence and training has been suggested,³² but the responses to this survey suggested that training had not been entirely successful in helping build confidence. This indicates other factors affecting user confidence, and the importance of ongoing support was mentioned several times:

"If people don't get sufficient and ongoing support they won't use it."

"I am not sure that the issue is always about trust – it is often about users having the skills and confidence to use the provided applications."

"The helpdesk is a good way to help unconfident users."

One respondent commented that trust was built by experience because "hardly anyone trusts a brand new system." This was echoed by another respondent "people will come round if they see and then start to experience the benefits of new processes – it just takes longer for some than for others!" And another found that "If system errors, issues and implementation problems are not remedied then there is an ongoing issue which is hard to overcome." A respondent who was in the process of implementing a new system found that many of the staff were blaming the new system for any user error.

It has been recommended that staff should be made conscious of the importance of records management and their responsibilities to keep records, as part of training.³³ In one organisation the records manager felt that "a lot of people in the business are not good with computers and do not see records as [being] important in fact they see records people as [being] a pain".

Perhaps the most confronting finding from this survey relates to the fact that although just over half of the respondents felt that employees trust their recordkeeping systems, almost all respondents listed ways staff found to bypass the system, or to hoard information. This implies that while there may be degrees of trust, trust is not absolute. Most listed personal 'hoarding of information' methods; these included saving to desktops, saving to shared drives, using the cloud, using USB sticks and external hard drives as well as sending records to email. Some also alter classification structure and change metadata. Two mentioned that some employees would simply not file anything while another stated that some felt that their work was "far too important to file in a recordkeeping system". Additional insights included:

"A hard message to pass through for us has been that the records and information belong to the organisation, not individual staff members."

"When staff get over the 'this is my stuff' idea, then the value of recordkeeping and trust in RK [recordkeeping] systems can be demonstrated really well to produce tangible results for the team."

Some organisations were attempting to tackle this problem by disabling drives. Strategies used to promote trust including ongoing support, demonstration of effectiveness, and training and communication. One respondent found that going back to basics was important for "explaining the concepts and reasons for good record and document management. Employees need to know the why as well as the what to do. Context helps to cement the ideas."

One respondent recommended the use of recordkeeping champions "Having one person in each team who understands the value of good recordkeeping and who promotes good recordkeeping in the team can make a huge difference." Another called this 'peer pressure' and found it effective, though peer pressure was found in another organisation to have negative effects, when new staff joined workgroups that were not trusting of the system. One was unsure that any strategy was totally effective because some staff do not really care. Several expanded on the concept of the slow building of trust by showing staff the advantages of retrieval and information sharing, but they noted that trust can be lost a lot faster than it takes to build it, and it can be difficult to regain.

Several records managers identified the same cause for problems they were experiencing in managing records. One respondent expressed the situation this way: "The people who are entrusted with responsibility are usually placed far down the hierarchical pecking order, and, in organisational and corporate terms, are treated as such. The very way in which organisations treat their records and archives (IM) staff serves to actually undermine the stated goal of creating, managing and maintaining good information for now and for the future."

This suggests that some records managers can see the problems in recordkeeping in their organisation, and see the potential solutions but, unless they have management support, are unable to implement them.

Records managers emphasised the need for alignment with work practices:

"It has to be EASY and seamless, or they just won't do it."

"... trust in recordkeeping systems is largely relative to the extent to which a recordkeeping system (or systems that contains records) align to business processes and how people work."

One records manager provided a vivid example of the loss of trust: their organisation had been left without a dedicated records manager for several years. The previous momentum, including trust in their system, was left to languish and the recordkeeping was left to 'go feral'. The respondent stated that if people don't get ongoing support they won't use a system and "now we've got the task of rebuilding the trust, awareness and staff capability".

Conclusion

This project has investigated the levels of trust in recordkeeping systems demonstrated by staff in the public sector in New Zealand, from the perspective of records managers. Most records managers surveyed regarded their recordkeeping system as successful, but fewer thought that users trusted their systems. The fact that almost all respondents described ways in which people bypass recordkeeping systems makes it clear that the situation with regard to trust is not as clear cut as may be assumed. While trust in the recordkeeping system is not the only factor affecting recordkeeping behaviours, it is certainly an important one.

Most participants agreed that management support and involvement is vital to promote user trust. People are less likely to trust a system that they do not see their managers using, that is not set up properly, is not integrated into their workflow, is not easy to use, and that lets them down too often. Without trust we will continue to see employees developing their own workarounds, resulting in incomplete recordkeeping. It is vital for records managers to build trust; this is a slow process, and trust, once lost, is difficult to regain.

Further research is needed to gain a better understanding of user perspectives. The workarounds, which we have categorised here as being symptomatic of a lack of trust, really deserve more attention. Investigating why these are instigated may provide insight into deficiencies in recordkeeping systems. The survey collected data relating to how records professionals respond to lack of trust issues. Conducting individual interviews or focus groups would be beneficial to shed light on how open records professionals are to what may be perceived the challenges posed by lack of trust behaviours.

Endnotes

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