The Extent and Nature of Computer-Based Records Management in the United States

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A national survey of records managers on the topic of computerization of their operations yielded surprising results. An overwhelming 92.4 percent reported that they were actively supporting computerization at present or planned to do so within the next year. The primary nature of the computerization was the use of microcomputers to track and manage physical, usually paper, records. The degree of computerization is related to the volume of records managed and the attitude of the company toward records management. The computerization of records management is only a few years old, yet the change has been rapid. Our findings indicate that the next step of Document Image Processing (DIP) where the records are also stored in a digital format is already underway and may proceed as fast as the first stage.

The computer, especially the microcomputer, is changing the way that we manage our information resources (Horton and Lannon, 1989). Within the general area of information management, the field of records management is presently undergoing a significant conversion involving the computer. Lundgren and Lundgren (1989) define records management in accordance with accepted terminology in the field as “the planning, staffing, organizing, directing and controlling of records and those processes associated with records”. (p. 5) Furthermore, records management is “organized around the life cycle of a record, which begins with its creation or acquisition and ends with its destruction or permanent storage”. (p. 5) There are two major steps that records management can take which involve computerization. In the first step, the computer is used to track traditional physical records such as paper, microfilm, storage boxes, tapes and other media. The second step is to track and store the records digitally within the computer. These steps are not mutually exclusive.

Computer storage and tracking of records comes under the rubric of Document Image Processing (DIP) using systems that digitize, store and retrieve documents. DIP extends into other related technologies under the concept of Intelligent
Document Management (IDM) which includes all of the ways that electronic images can created, stored, managed, manipulated, and disseminated (Michalski, 1991). This interrelationship of records management with other systems, which is being induced by the computer, is changing the nature of the field.

**Records Management**

Records management has traditionally been concerned with paper-based and film records. Records managers have developed methodologies for dealing with large quantities of information, and they have evolved efficient retrieval operations for dealing with paper and image-based records such as microfilm. It could be said that records management is ripe for the computer age. Introduction of the computer into other business areas has been more problematic. For example, the development and acceptance of knowledge-based systems has been difficult. Many of the difficulties are tied to insufficient end-user participation (Dologite and Mockler, 1989). However, records managers are ready and able to participate in computerization because the addition of the computer does not fundamentally change records management operations; it simply makes those operations faster and more reliable. Of course, other areas in companies use computers. In fact, data processing is probably the area most closely associated with computer use in a business. Consequently, computer use has linked records management to data processing.

This research is concerned with determining the impact of the computer on the field of records management. We know that the microcomputer is at least as heavily used as the mainframe computer (Skillman and Dmytrenko, 1989; Davis, 1989). We know that computers are being used to manage and track physical records (Lundgren and Lundgren, 1987). But we do not know the precise extent or nature of company involvement with computerization for record management functions.

We wanted to establish the direction and breadth of the application of computer technology to records management and the records manager’s role in that application. To accomplish these objectives, we sampled a national group of records managers and asked them to describe themselves, their records systems, and the role of the computer in their company operations.

**Research Background**

The primary focus of this research was to determine the extent of computerization of traditional records information systems in the United States. Previous research suggests that the company’s attitude toward records management as well as the attitude and education of the records manager may affect the development of the records environment and, consequently, the existence of computer-based records management in the organization (Lundgren and Lundgren, 1990). Therefore, a secondary focus was to look at the factors that are related to an organization’s computerization, including the characteristics of the records managers and the company’s commitment to the records management function.

Computers have been handling information management tasks since their invention, but corporate records management has traditionally been responsible for establishing policies and procedures that coordinate and manage hardcopy and microfilm company records. For example, computer output microfilm (COM) and computer-assisted retrieval (CAR) are film-related technologies that have nothing to do with the database management activities of the data processing department. Generally, the records manager and data processing manager have occupied distinct and separate worlds (Oliva, 1987). This situation is not likely to continue with common areas of professional involvement which call for the cooperative development of methodologies for information management (Phillips, 1989). Information management specialists have indeed crossed paths, but there is uncertainty about the relation-