Northumbria Research Link

Accelerating positive change in e-records management – the AC⁺erm project

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Introduction

AC⁺erm *(Accelerating positive change in electronic records management)* is a three-year project being conducted by the recently renamed Information Management Innovation Research Group in the School of Computing, Engineering & Information Sciences at Northumbria University[1]. It is the first research project on e-records management to be funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

Aim & objectives

Its aim is to investigate and critically explore issues and practical strategies to support accelerating the pace of positive change in electronic records management (ERM) and its objectives are to:

- develop a critical global view of ERM
- gather multi-disciplinary and key stakeholder expert opinion on ERM issues
- gather knowledge of practical strategies and critical success factors for managing electronic records
- develop an appropriate paradigm for ERM.

In addition to the findings the main output will be a series of vignettes to support ERM and share knowledge and practice with stakeholders who have responsibility for managing records. These will be in the form of scenarios that distil the challenges and problems and present possible solutions, recommendations, advice, games etc. for use in different contexts such as training, communication, developing strategy, policy, procedures.

The project was inspired by John McDonald's phrase *accelerating the pace of positive change in electronic records management.* He used it in a reflection on his mid-1990s vision of 'managing records in the modern office – taming the wild frontier'[2] in which he concluded that the situation remains wild, that progress in managing electronic records has been slow and that there are reasons for this. He highlighted *leadership* (or lack of it) as the "single most important factor impacting the ability of organizations to move forward on the management of electronic records", also citing "confusion over roles, responsibilities and strategic direction" as well as lack of resources and expertise. Suggested ways out of the wilderness are to "focus on establishing a vision, enhancing awareness, assignment accountability, designing and architecture, and building capacity"[3]. The AC⁺erm project is focusing on *designing an architecture* and is exploring three perspectives:

(i) people, including vision, awareness, culture, drivers and barriers;
(ii) working practices including processes, procedures, policies and standards; and
(iii) technology, in terms of the design principles for delivering effective recordkeeping.

Approach

The project is a major endeavour and is utilising an interesting research approach, combining a systematic literature review with a global investigation, a blog and website for ongoing dissemination and an expert advisory panel. The panel of

experts is multi-disciplinary and includes representatives of all four key stakeholder groups, senior managers, records professionals, IT/systems administrators and employees (ISO 15489, 2001), in keeping with the philosophy of the project. John McDonald and Adrian Cunningham, the National Archives of Australia, are members.

Systematic Literature Review phase
This phase is a major review of the ERM literature using a technique never used before in the records management field. Systematic literature reviews[4], unlike traditional ones, use a particular standard process and aim for a more objective, rigorous approach to reviewing the literature. This comes from establishing *a priori* the elements of the process, including criteria for searching and selecting the literature, assessing its quality, summarising it and analysing the findings. The output is a narrative report, a bibliography of the selected items, and a detailed description of the review process itself.

Investigation phase
In this phase three facets of designing an organisation-centred architecture for ERM are being investigated - people issues, understanding work processes, and systems and technologies - using a combination of electronic Delphi studies and face-to-face colloquia. The Delphi studies gather primary data from selected participants to develop a picture of 'expert opinion' on each facet; conducting them electronically enables anonymous and global participation. The colloquia disseminate as well as validate and extend the findings. The first, on people issues (exploring vision, awareness, culture, drivers and barriers), created some very lively discussions. The data is informing the development of the vignettes. To date, the people facet has been completed, with the process and technology facets taking place in autumn 2008 and spring 2009 respectively.

Dissemination phase
To emphasise the urgency of the ERM issue, influence change as the research proceeds, and encourage widespread discussion, interim findings are being disseminated regularly via the project website and blog[5]. The blog was a first for a UK archives/records management research project.

Value
The value of the AC[+]erm project is not only its topic, providing a deeper understanding of ERM issues with strategies and solutions to address them, but also its approach. By engaging a mix of experts, disciplines and the wider community of recordkeeping stakeholders to gather new data, it is building partnerships and raising awareness of their roles and responsibilities – both vitally important if organisations are to make real progress in ERM.

References

[1] McLeod, J. (2008). *AC+erm: Accelerating the pace of positive change in e-records management.* Paper presented at the Society of Archivists Conference, 26-29 August 2008, York.

[2] McDonald, J (1995). Managing records in the modern office: taming the wild frontier. *Archivaria*, 39 (Spring), p. 70-79.

[3] McDonald, J. (2005). The wild frontier ten years on. In: McLeod, J and Hare, CE (Eds). *Managing electronic records.* Facet.

[4] Ashby D; Young K. *Systematic reviews: What have they got to offer evidence based policy and practice? ESRC UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice: Working Paper 2.* ESRC UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice, Queen Mary, University of London, 2002.

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[5] AC[+]erm website www.northumbria.ac.uk/acerm with links to blog
(http://acerm.blogspot.com/) and interim results.