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On the Nature of Records Management Theory

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Abstract: Theory is defined as a view or description of the nature of something. The nature of theory relating to records management theory is examined, including information retrieval, the records life-cycle, and information policy. Records management theory should not be seen in isolation and need not be unique to records management. Functional, professional, and educational contexts of records management theory are outlined, with examples.

Introduction

Various opinions are possible concerning Records Management theory:

1. That there is a well-defined and established theory governing records management practice;
2. That there is no theory guiding records management practice;
3. That there are a number of theories supporting records management practice, but they belong to allied disciplines or sciences and are used whenever the need for action founded on principles manifests itself.

In this paper, we will argue that none of the above is correct. Instead, we suggest that: (i) there is a body of records management theory that has not yet been well-formulated; (ii) parts of this theory are and will increasingly be shared with other fields; and (iii) much of it is, perhaps, not yet properly recognized as theory. But first we need to clarify our terms. In particular, before addressing the question “Is there a Records Management theory?” or, better, “What is records management theory?” the prior question “What is theory?” needs to be addressed if we are not to waste our time.

What is “theory”?

The original meaning and underlying sense of the word “theory” is a view of, or perspective on, something. In its origins, the word “theory” is related to the word “theater” (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989, v. 7, p. 902). More generally theory is someone's view or *description of the nature of something*. In this general sense there is theory of anything that you can describe the nature of.

One problem is that intelligent discussion of theory in most areas has been sidetracked by the high social prestige of the mathematical and experimental sciences, especially since the Second World War. Logic and physics are unusual in that if you have a view about the nature of some aspect of them, you can generally express your view (your theory) in such a way that it can be experimentally tested and, perhaps, found to be inadequate. Finding evidence to support

theories is relatively easy and of limited utility. It is good-faith effort to *refute* theories that is basic to progress. Therefore, *in those disciplines*, it is generally expected that theories can be rigorously stated and can be tested by seeking to refute them. (Typically a theory is a hypothesis or combination of hypotheses that has withstood some testing.)

Unfortunately, people have assumed that activities that are not “hard” sciences should also use the same restricted, specialized sense of theory. When they look for this sort of rigorous sort of theory and refutation in the messy world of human activities, such as the provision and use of information services, they do not find any--predictably!--and are deterred by this narrow preconception with rigorous, formal theory from noticing theory that is appropriate to the subject. (For an example of an unsuccessful, misformulated search for theory see Boyce and Kraft 1985). Aristotle knew better: “It is a mark of the educated man and a proof of his culture that in every subject he looks for only so much precision as its nature permits.” (Aristotle 1955, 27-28)

There should be no rigid dichotomy of “theory” versus “practice”, since some view of what is involved--in effect *theory*--underlies both. Nevertheless, the thoughtful practitioner in records management, as in other useful fields, is generally faced with choosing between formal, rigorous, “respectable” theory that seems divorced from messy everyday realities and less formal “theory” that does reflect, more or less, the untidy reality encountered in practice, but doesn't seem much like theory (Schon 1983, 42-45). The challenge for the thoughtful, and especially for academics, is to seek to bridge the gap: To develop formal theories that are more realistic and to develop realistic views that are framed in terms of general principles.

How trivial is Records Management?

Once we back off from the absurdity of assuming that records management theory should have the characteristics of theory of a formal science, the question changes from *whether* there is a theory to what we are theorizing about. More bluntly: How trivial or how complex is records management?

If we considered records management to be only the numbering, shelving, fetching, and re-shelving of pieces of paper, then our view of it--our theory--will also be rather trivial. No matter how economically valuable that *activity* may be, the *theory* is not likely to be very interesting.

But if we view Records Management as management of access to the working records of an organization, then some more complex aspects arise of which I will mention three examples:

1. *Information retrieval*. Fetching Purchase order #1234 is straightforward, a matter of looking up the location and physically transporting it. But how do you identify what records exist that would meet some ill-defined need? What about all documents relevant to a firm's activities that could be construed as evidence of discrimination? How does a university find documents that might show its contributions to the well-being of local industry?

Information retrieval can include up to three functions: (i) Physically fetching a copy of a document; (ii) Locating where some known document is currently housed; and (iii) Identifying which documents, if any, fit some description. Well-defined records series, but more is likely to be needed. One enters the large and complex area of indexing, classification, thesauri, data dictionaries, and so on.

2. *The records life-cycle*. A more efficient and more cost-effective performance of any kind of records management service is likely if the records manager becomes involved in the full life-cycle of records. But involvement in the full cycle entails involvement in a wide variety of issues: form design and management, human factors and workflow, retention schedules and appraisal for archival retention, information technology, and vital records protection.

3. *Information policy*. What (and who) determines who should and who should not have access to records? This involves legal and ethical issues arising from freedom of information and privacy legislation, trade secrets, and more. These matters are complicated, contradictory, and of great importance, especially for records management on the public sector. For example, should the public have access to some or all of the personnel records of public officials or do the privacy rights of such officials take precedence? When, and on what grounds, can working drafts of documents be kept confidential?

These three examples (information retrieval; records life cycle design; and information policies) are sufficient to indicate that if you view records management broadly as having to do with access to the working records of an organization, then one can hardly avoid viewing the nature of the field as practically and conceptually complicated--as actually or potentially rich in theory of one kind or another.

Ostrich Science: or, What is unique to Records Management?

Another problem of theory in professional practice is the desire to identify a theory or science that is *unique* to that occupation. This, too, is unwise.

The issues and principles of who should have access to records is both a legal issue and a records management issue. The life-cycle concept is common to both archives and records management. Indexing and classification schemes are also concerns of librarianship, museology, data base management, and other areas. Does this matter? Yes, it does matter in a positive way because it is beneficial that other occupational groups also have a vested interest in tackling the same or related problems. What is needed is communication and collaboration, not self-imposed professional apartness.

I would not regard the provision of access to the records of an organization as unimportant or easy. Status and respect come from doing a difficult and important task well, not from insisting that one is not an archivist, not a librarian, not whatever. Defining the scope of records management also defines by implication what sorts of theory would be relevant. The more ideas that can be derived from other fields the better the records management service will be.

Consider a scientist studying an ostrich--an Ostrich Scientist. Doubtless a lot of theory is involved in studying ostriches. I doubt, however, that much is unique to ostriches. Rather, we should expect variant forms or special cases of theories also relevant to other birds and or other animals of the same habitat. One can be an ostrich scientist, but be suspicious of someone who insists that there is an Ostrich Science that is somehow separate and independent of other disciplines. Somebody's head may be in the sand.

Theoretical Contexts of Records Management Theory.

By “theoretical context” we mean a broader area of theory into which records management theory fits. There can be many such theoretical contexts. We will mention just three.

1. *Functional context*. Records management serves a firm or other organization. Therefore, the *mission* of a records management service needs to be related to and supportive of the mission of the organization as a whole. The *role* of the records management program needs to be articulated with the roles of other parts of the organization: the roles, needs, and activities of employees needing access to records; the roles of other information-related programs such as Management Information Systems, data processing, the library, and the archives. In other words, records management theory is likely to be sterile or incomplete unless it is related to a view of the organization as a whole. More than academic curiosity is involved. If we are to assert that the role of records management is important, then we need to have views on how a good records management program contributes to and supports the effectiveness of the organization.

2. *Professional context*. Records management can be seen as one member of a family of retrieval-based information systems. An Italian is not the same as a Briton, but they are both Europeans and share some things in common as Europeans. Archives, libraries, records management programs, and corporate databases are not the same, but they are all retrieval-based information services and so have some features in common as well as differences that make them uniquely different (Buckland 1982, 1991).

Seeing records management as a member of a family of retrieval-based information systems is not new. This view was adopted in the “Documentation” movement early this century, especially in the writings of the Paul Otlet (1868-1944) (Rayward 1976, 1986). What we now call records management, Otlet called “administrative documentation” and he saw it as an important specialty in administration. He also included what we now call Management Information Systems as part of administrative documentation. Otlet wrote a number of papers on the subject and his ideas were implemented to a limited extent in Europe (Otlet 1923, 1930, 1934, 350-55; Rayward 1976, 160, 184).

Otlet viewed archives, bibliography, libraries, museums, and records management as parts of the broad field of “Documentation” or “General Documentation”, or, as we might say now-a-days, information resource management. In 1923 he wrote, somewhat prematurely, that administrative documentation was a branch of “general documentation,” which was born from the convergence and then the fusion of bibliography, archive administration, and even museology (Otlet 1923, 13).

Otlet was a major figure in his time but is now little known. His writings are only now beginning to appear in English (Otlet 1990). However, the idea that there might be theoretical and practical benefit in seeing records management (and other sorts of information services) as part of a family of related information professions and of adopting a comparative approach has received attention recently in North America (Seibell 1987; Pemberton & Prentice 1990; Buckland, 1991).

3. *Intellectual context*. Another kind of context is what could be called the “intellectual context”. Where did ideas in records management ideas come from and where have records management ideas gone to? Two examples can illustrate this point. One source of records management ideas is archival theory. Posner (1940) teased archivists for their penchant for tracing their roots to ancient Assyria. Perhaps that ancient archival activity is more accurately described as ancient

records management (Walker 1989). Professor Duranti has recently summarized that aspect of the intellectual ancestry of records managers (Duranti 1989).

In the other direction, it is less widely known that fashionable current ideas in computer science concerning hypertext and hypermedia have part of their roots in records management. A major inspiration in that field has been a visionary essay "As we may think" by Vannevar Bush (1945). This fantasy, drafted in 1939, was based on his experience with a project funded by Eastman Kodak and National Cash Register to develop a faster method of retrieving of microfilmed business records using a machine known as a "rapid selector". Rapid selectors were essentially a pre-computer version of Computer Assisted Retrieval (CAR) in which the index entries were recorded as patterns on the microfilm itself next to the images of the documents. The index entries were searched using a photo-electric cell to detect matches between the index pattern sought and the index patterns on the microfilm. Rapid selector technology was initially developed in the late 1920's by Zeiss Ikon in Germany and later, from the 1930s to the 1960s, in the USA, usually to assist in the locating and retrieving of microfilmed corporate records or technical reports (Goldberg, 1992; Buckland, 1992; Alexander & Rose, 1964; Stevens, 1968).

Comparison

One does not get very far trying to define and describe things in their own terms. It is comparison that is the most basic of intellectual activity. Comparing the nature of records management with other things is a necessary condition for progress in developing a view--a theory--of records management. To understand records management better we need to devote more attention to comparing records management with other related activities. Only by means of a thorough understanding of similarities and dissimilarities can we expect to develop a deep understanding of the nature--a theory--of records management.

Summary

1. A theory is a view of the nature of something.
2. Theory should not be more formal than the nature of the phenomena to be described will permit. Overly formalized theories cease to describe reality on a useful way.
3. Any view of records management as being more than the filing and fetching of documents will provide a basis for non-trivial theory.
4. Few parts of the theory in records management are likely to be unique to records management, though the detailed application and the overall blend will be. Shared theory is advantageous because it means that others share a motivation to seek improved understanding.
5. Records management can be viewed in relation to different contexts, e.g. functional, professional, intellectual. Viewing each such broader context yields a body of theory--or an opportunity to develop one.

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