

Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford

The New Work Place: Interruptions and Systems

According to a recent study of work patterns within two high-tech firms each employee spends only eleven minutes on a project before being interrupted. Within those eleven minutes the work may be further fragmented into three-minute intervals as the employee responds to an e-mail, reads a Web page, or switches to work on a spread sheet. It takes, on average, twenty-five minutes for the employee to get back to the original task. These interruptions, often associated with the new office technologies designed to make us more productive, have given rise to "interruption science" as a new field of study (Clive Thompson, "Meet the Life Hackers," *New York Times* Sunday Magazine, October 16, 2005).

The Archives has become enmeshed in work pattern studies as well. Our look at how government entities conduct their work is associated with a series of legislative mandates to develop strategic plans for managing records. Our particular interest lies in how business activities generate records and on how information flows across these activities and entities. The goal is to develop tools to help understand how we conduct business and thus develop systematic approaches for managing information from the point of creation to ultimate disposition.

While the immediate impetus is the legislative mandates, the approach reflects changing emphases within archival management. Archivists no longer have the luxury or ability to look at or evaluate records; there are just too darn many of them. Instead archivists are beginning to look at the systems that produce, store and transmit records and information and then support incorporating recordkeeping rules and needs into those systems.

Of course "system" may be too optimistic a term for how recordkeeping has evolved. Too often decisions are made in isolation, various technologies are implemented without understanding long term opportunities and consequences, and, as a result, the potential value of both records and technology are not realized.

Legislative committee records provide an example. In 1917 the Vermont house and senate changed their rules to require the clerk of each committee to "keep a record of reference of each bill considered, of the persons requesting to be heard, of the notice, if any, of the dates when the bill is considered, and the vote of each member of the committee thereon." Prior to the adoption of those rules (now found as Rules 29 of the house and senate) there were no committee records (nor do there appear to have been committee clerks). While there is no record of the rules' intent the requirement that the records "be open to the inspection of the people" suggests transparency of legislative deliberations was at least one goal. Interestingly the senate, but not the house, specified that the committee records be preserved after the session by the secretary of state; by 1919 the house rules added this requirement.

By the 1920s committee clerks moved beyond the bare bones recording requirements of the rules and began to take minutes of committee testimony and discussion. These minutes ranged from sparse, even cryptic scrawls, to in-depth, type-written notes. The committee clerks were legislators (and as noted in my March 2005 column, primarily women legislators).

In the late 1960s-early 1970s legislative support services, including some clerical support, were added through the creation of the Legislative Council and Joint Fiscal Office. The clerical support services began to take over some of the requirements of Rules 29, notably the notice of committee meetings and the list of people testifying.

The 1970s also saw tape recorders introduced to capture committee testimony and deliberations. This was a relief for the legislator-clerks who felt their recording duties prevented full participation in committee deliberations. The committee minutes, which already reflected the clerks' ambivalence about recordkeeping, became even sparser. Legislators logically decided that if everything was being recorded, why take minutes.

The clerical staff kept a log of the tapes and, until 1985, routinely transcribed the tapes. This created a complete, verbatim record of committee activities. By 1985, however, routine transcribing, which was labor-intensive, ended. In the 1990s cassettes replaced the old reel to reel recorders and, by the end of the decade, the move began to digitally record committees. The moves to cassettes and then CDs were made because the older technologies were becoming obsolete and the newer technologies were seen as more efficient recording devices. At the same time, in the senate, the clerical staff took on greater roles in taking minutes.

By the 1990s the schedules and other records generated by the clerical staff were increasing captured through computers and the Council also began to post some of the records on the legislative website.

Back in the early 1980s the Legislative Council realized that it had to do something with the growing volume of records it was creating. Though this involves some speculation, it appears that the problem was approached as a space issue—what to do with the reams of transcripts, tapes, and other records filling up office space—rather than a record/information issue. It also appears that the problem was approached from the perspective of who created the records (the Council in this case) rather than the role of the records as part of the legislative process. Therefore the decision was made to store the records at the state record center. While this solved, at one level, the space problem, it accelerated the diffusion of legislative records, complicating access (remember that Rules 29 required minutes, as kept by the committee clerk, to go to the secretary of state; now minutes, transcripts and tapes kept by the Council went to the record center).

The consequences of this history include a physically and intellectually fragmented set of records related to a single function (legislating) that are extremely difficult to access; a growing gap between certain recordkeeping mandates (such as Rules 29) and actual practice; and, though not touched on above, a mounting preservation problem as recordkeeping technologies are superseded without addressing records captured on the legacy technologies. Though they are all related to a single process, records generated by Legislative Council draft persons, legislative committees, Council clerical staff, study committees, etc. are treated as unique to whichever entity created them. Those records are captured on one or more of the following medium or formats: paper, analog reel to reel tapes; analog cassette tapes; CDs, databases, word documents, spread sheets, Web documents, etc. Taking just one use of the records—researching legislative intent—one has to visit up to four different government units, in two different towns, without reference to a single "finding aid" explaining where any particular record is or how it relates to other records germane to the research.

These consequences are not the result of a conspiracy of dunces. Indeed, throughout the 88 year history of legislative committee records, each individual action shaping recordkeeping was based on a rational business decision. It was a rational decision by legislators, who wanted to legislate rather than take notes, to record testimony. It was a rational decision, given expenses, to stop transcribing everything. It was a rational decision to move recording to emerging technologies as the older technologies were no longer supported. It was a rational decision to find a way to free up valuable office space by moving the records to off-site storage. Etc.

What was lost was an overall context for making those decisions or a mechanism for evaluating not only why or how activities were performed, but also for evaluating the long term consequences of each decision (and remember, the legislature works on two-year cycles, with legislators serving, on average, around six years).

This, in turn, illustrates the value of a systems approach. Such an approach would identify the function (to legislate), all the activities associated with legislating regardless of who performed that activity (committees, Legislative Council, etc), how those activities were done, and the relative value, to whom, of the records generated by each activity. That system would include a continuous process of re-evaluation as work process and mandates changed. System-based views can guide decisions over what technologies, managed how, best support record creation, preservation, and use.

This is why the Archives is interested in a systems approach, even if it involves a lot more front end work than simply looking for technological solutions to undefined problems. But this is more than an Archives perspective or an issue with state records. It recently was our pleasure to work with Colchester officials on a scanning project. On their own these officials decided on a functional approach and are designing their computer systems to reflect how records flow among town officers and how the public uses those records.

It is exciting, and daunting, to re-think long established practices. But Albert Einstein got it right when he said, "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used to create them."

NOTE: I was going to be clever and keep a log of the interruptions I experienced once I started writing this column. After logging three separate meetings, 30 different e-mails and an equal number of phone calls, and a variety of staff and researcher questions, I gave up. The log was interrupting my work too much.