The Classic Attributes of a Profession: Does Recordkeeping Qualify?

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Introduction

Although records have been used and managed by man for millennia, recordkeeping is a relatively new term coined to describe the field of endeavour that encompasses the complete range of responsibilities and activities performed by those working with records regardless of type, format, age or information content. It thus encompasses both contempory records management and archives and unites records managers and archivists under one umbrella. The international standard ISO15489 supports this holistic inclusive view of recordkeeping.

Technological evolution has taken recordkeeping practice from the relatively simple management of paper-based records to the highly complex management of a variety of media, in a relatively short period of time. High profile cases of fraud and business failure, and increased government regulation of both business entities and government agencies, have resulted in increased requirements for compliant recordkeeping. Such changes have necessitated a change in the knowledge base and skill levels required by recordkeeping practitioners, particularly at the more senior levels. Although some recordkeeping positions have always existed at the middle management level, these positions have increased in number, and the seniority of positions and remuneration are also increasing steadily. But, can recordkeeping be considered a profession?

Is recordkeeping a profession?

Recognition of an occupation or field of endeavour as a profession is usually associated with higher status and rewards for practitioners. Many recordkeeping practitioners consider themselves professionals based on their level of employment and their length of experience in the field, regardless of any educational qualification or professional certification.

As man developed and reached the stage of empire building, with all the associated complexities of civil administration, the need arose for an orderly, collective system of *memory* to facilitate administration and continuance over time and distance. When writing was first invented recordkeeping became recognised as a very elite, well-remunerated high status profession. Over time as the populace became more literate, this status declined and it is only in the 20th century that we see a perception of a reinvention of recordkeeping as a profession. The explosion of records created in the 20th century has spearheaded a drive to create a logical ordered system for the best practice management of current records and at the same time ensure that those records which survived long-term would be the most important, not simply a survival based on serendipity. But, does this make recordkeeping a profession?

Major changes in the areas of legislation, standards and theory development have had an enormous impact on the quality of recordkeeping practice, particularly in the public sector. The increasing emphasis on electronic records with the complex body of knowledge required for their management has also provided an opportunity for recordkeepers to become recognised as professionals. But a systematic analysis is required to determine whether or not the recordkeeping field can be considered a profession.

Professionalisation

Occupations do not come into being as fully-fledged professions. They usually develop over time from other occupations. The process of *professionalisation* is a dynamic, but usually very long and extended process possibly taking centuries to evolve. Over time physicians and doctors developed as an offshoot of the barbering trade, and lawyers from notaries.

Larson (1977) noted that modern professions, as distinct from the medieval guilds, are "relatively recent social products" (p. 2), which began to reorganise and reform themselves in the first half nineteenth century, as part of the "competitive phase of capitalism" (p. 8). She comments that professions are "one of the distinctive features of industrial capitalism even though they claim to renounce the profit motive" (p. 8). Larson argues that professions developed around specific bodies of socially useful complex knowledge and expertise because:

> a collective effort was needed on the part of the actual or potential sellers of services to capture and control expanded markets. For this, new forms of eliciting and guaranteeing the buyers' preference and trust had to be devised and implemented. (p. 9)

Much research on professions in the latter part of the twentieth century focussed on the process of professionalisation and the determination of the place of individual occupations on the *occupation—profession continuum,* as well as the strategies used by aspiring occupational groups such as accountants, pharmacists, librarians, social workers, nurses and others, in their drive to become recognised as mature professions with elite status and privileged rewards such as money and power (Collins, 1979; Larson, 1977; McDonald, 1995).

Context of the study

A section of the Australian public sector (the Western Australian state government) was used as the context of the study. The public sector is the largest employer in Australia and provides a recordkeeping environment that is now well regulated theoretically across Australia at the federal, state and local government levels, through appropriate legislation and frameworks based on the international best practice recordkeeping standard (*ISO 15489*). Western Australia provides a context of practice that is reflected in other public jurisdictions around Australia. Other jurisdictions around the world may be less well regulated, but many countries now promote best practice in order to improve public recordkeeping.

Research approach

The classic attributes of a profession (trait theory) were derived from the literature and developed into a model against which to map and analyse the recordkeeping field as a profession based on the presence or absence of these criteria. The recordkeeping environment or universe is represented in the model by the various stakeholder groups identified as relevant to recordkeeping in the Western Australian state public sector and the general public. Data for the mapping process were collected from a content analysis of recordkeeping advertisements, relevant websites and official documents available from recordkeeping professional bodies and educational institutions, from surveys of recordkeeping employees, employers, recruitment consultants, educators and trainers, regulators, and the recordkeeping associations, as well as the professional literature and the general public.

Model of a profession

The professional criteria identified in the literature were synthesised into six broad areas and these are listed below. The model developed is shown in Figure 1.

1. Shared social values and worldview or paradigm;
2. Social relevance and public recognition as a profession;
3. Domain-specific body of knowledge, theory, principles, expertise;
4. Professional education at the university level;
5. Research and theory development agenda; and a
6. Professional subculture which includes a professional association.

Model of a Profession

Shared societal values, worldview or paradigm	Social relevance, public recognition	Domain-specific body knowledge, theory, principles & expertise

Environment (recordkeeping universe)

Professional education, university-level	Professional subculture, professional body	Research & theory development agenda
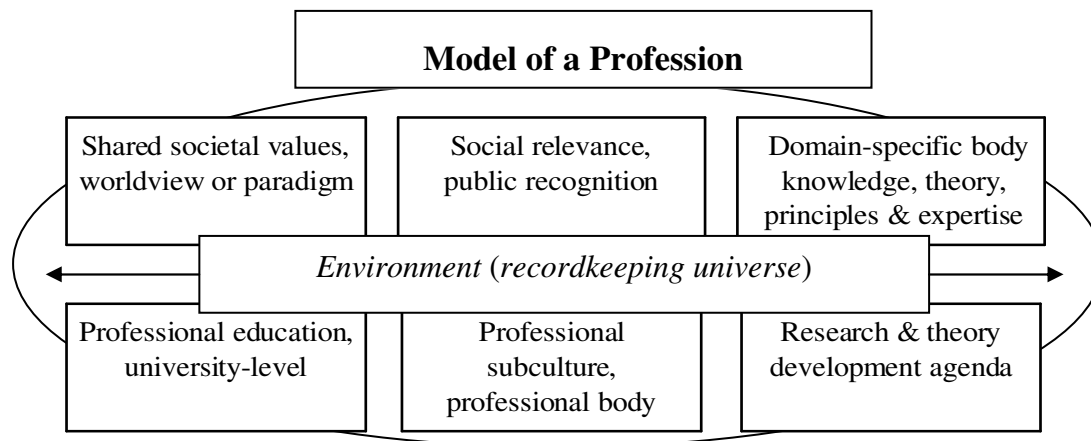
Figure 1: Model illustrating the criteria of a profession

These criteria or traits have been used to distinguish between occupations and professions for almost a century, and were initially based on the archetypal professions such as medicine, law, engineering and architecture. Some researchers, such as Larson (1977) and Freidson (1970), have questioned the appropriateness of a professional model based on the classic professions, as a tool to assess other quite disparate service occupations as professions. Both felt that many of the criteria used to measure professional status are subjective and difficult to quantify, and this is indeed the case. Just how does one assess the degree of development or existence of a criterion before one can say, "yes, this field does meet this criterion"? However, despite these concerns, after an exhaustive study, Larson (1977: iv) still believed that "the model of profession nevertheless retains its vigor; it is still something to be defended or something to be attained by occupations in a different historical context, in radically different work settings, and in radically altered forms of practice". In the context of the recordkeeping field the model is a useful tool to analyse the characteristics of the recordkeeping field.

The six criteria identified as critical components of a profession are discussed below in the recordkeeping context. The order of the criteria does not indicate any level of priority.

1.   Shared societal values and worldview or paradigm

A *worldview* defines the unique way a discipline or profession views the world, a view from inside the profession, a framework to guide the development of the profession as a whole. A worldview may be complex enough to be divided into subdisciplines or specialisations but each must retain the overall vision or *raison d'etre* of the discipline. The worldview should be shaped by the shared concept of "social good" or "social value", a commitment to a service-orientated, client–centred perspective, rather than financial reward. This social awareness and responsibility theoretically permeates all professional practice and is articulated in the profession's code of ethics or statement of professional practice.

The literature suggests that the recordkeeping field recognises the importance of a commitment to the social good through a responsibility for best practice recordkeeping as a mechanism for public accountability and the protection of personal rights, as well as the preservation of the corporate memory. Kolsrud (1992: 37) observed that archival work also had a democratic dimension. He felt that it was important to ensure that "the doings of a nation's administrative and political machinery are fairly well documented and made accessible to the public". In addition to this civic role, archives "offer citizens a sense of roots, identity, locality, history, and collective memory", when societal-based models are used to ground principles and practice (Cook, 1999; ISO 15489; Samuels, 1986; Taylor, 1987-88).

Hans Booms (translated 1987, original 1972) believed all groups in society, minority or otherwise, had a role to play in the overall fabric of society and these roles should be reflected in the archival record to give a true unbiased picture of society at large. And Derrida (1995) believed that there "is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory" (p. 4), and accepted the possibility and even probability, that memory and power could be manipulated through archives by those in power (p. 28). History is written largely by the victors.

Throughout the major part of the 20th century records managers and archivists operated largely independently, despite the fact that both had a central focus on the management of the record, albeit at different stages of the life cycle. Pederson (1997) describes this separation of practice as the "great schism". She attributes this phenomenon largely to recordkeeping practice since the French Revolution, when the records of the old regime were officially closed and made accessible to the public, whereas the records of the new regime were not (French Convention, 1794). "The makers gradually devolved into functionaries ruled by bureaucrats and bound by detailed procedures and regulations and the keepers [of the archival records] evolved into a more scholarly class increasingly absorbed with diplomatics, palaeography and historical research…." (p. 203). This divisive practice was reinforced by the widespread use of the life cycle model from the 1940s, and two distinct groups of practitioners, the records manager and the archivist evolved, despite the fact that some very early thinkers (Brooks, 1943, Evans, 1967; Maclean, 1959) advocated a closer working relationship between the two.

Theoretically, with the rise of continuum theory in the latter part of the 20th century, the recordkeeping profession today is a unified profession of all practitioners involved in the management of the record, regardless of time or space. Upward (1996: 275) notes that the continuum concept of 'records' is inclusive of continuing or archival value and unifies approaches to archiving/recordkeeping whether records are kept for a split second or a millennium. The records continuum model unites societal memory and evidentiary focused recordkeeping practice. Australian practitioners have embraced continuum theory and it is widely promulgated and practised, firstly through the mechanism of the Australian standard for recordkeeping (*AS 4390—1996*) and then the international standard (*ISO 15489—2001*). All recordkeeping legislation and supporting guidelines and principles developed by regulatory authorities in Australia are predicated on "best practice" recordkeeping standards.

The continuum approach is less well accepted internationally. Cook (2000: 6) considers the continuum model "the world's most inclusive model for archives", but criticises Australians for their rather narrow view of the life cycle model. In defence of the life cycle, he points out that it was never meant to create a dichotomy between current recordkeeping and archives. He noted that many archivists following the life cycle model still worked closely "up front" with records managers. This was not usually the case in Australian practice. All early Australian recordkeeping legislation could more accurately be termed archival legislation as the focus was largely on ensuring the long-term survival of the public record of enduring value and its transfer to the custody of archival agencies. However, Australian public recordkeeping practice today is predicated largely on the continuum and this provides a unified construct or worldview of recordkeeping, regardless of whether one is a practising archivist or records manager.

In the past the two Australian associations, the Records Management Association of Australasia (RMAA) and the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA), had two quite separate missions in support of two largely separate occupations: the ASA originally had a focus on permanent value records and the RMAA on current business records. Pederson (2005: 60) argues that the development of professional cohesion in recordkeeping has been hampered by the different perspectives, missions and values of records managers and archivists. It is

difficult to provide a unified voice for the recordkeeping profession with such fundamental differences and it has only been since electronic records became so all pervasive that the two areas of practice have begun seriously to investigate commonality of practice and purpose and the possibility of a shared future with a unified recordkeeping vision.

At the 1998 Annual General Meeting of the ASA (AGM Minutes 1998) the society's definition of *archivist* was amended to describe an archivist as "a person substantially engaged in or responsible for work which helps ensure that records providing evidence of administrative, corporate, cultural and intellectual activity are made, kept and used". A list of dot points were included to broaden the archivists mission to the whole range of functions concerned with the management of records from the design of systems through to archiving. This is perhaps the first genuine attempt in Australia where rhetoric has been supported by action, to promote a single profession focussed on a single activity, *recordkeeping.*

The value system and social commitment of a profession is articulated in its code of ethics or statement of professional practice. Both the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) and the Records Management Association of Australasia (RMAA) have developed written codes of ethics or conduct to guide practitioners in carrying out their professional work and protect the rights of practitioners and clients. Such codes encompass far more than the mere avoidance of wrongdoing, they are about moral principles and standards that promote the *common good,* beyond a focus on privilege and reward.

With developments in recordkeeping theory such as the continuum, the gulf between those managing the current record and the archival record has in theory, disappeared. The "great schism" identified by Pederson (1997) should be a thing of the past. Stakeholders surveyed ranked the importance of a world view or paradigm at either three or four in the list of six criteria identifying a profession. The international best practice standard (*ISO 15489*) and recordkeeping legislation throughout Australia are predicated on the seamless management of the record regardless of time or space, however, the existence of two separate recordkeeping associations for recordkeeping does not demonstrate this shared construct.

When applying the data gathered from the professional literature of recordkeeping, the official publications of the relevant stakeholders, such as annual reports and websites, and the stakeholder surveys, to the criterion of *shared societal values and worldview or paradigm,* it can be said that the broad recordkeeping field does meet the criterion sufficiently to be considered a profession. The worldview and the concept of shared values would however, be considerably enhanced if the two associations were to amalgamate to provide a single strong and unified recordkeeping association.

2. Social relevance and recognition by the public

The literature of professions indicates that a profession has a clear identity and role in society and an associated recognition and endorsement by society for that unique role (Abbott, 1988; Larson, 1977). Part of this recognition is as an authority within its unique field of endeavour. Larson (1977: 137) claims that "the possession of scarce knowledge and skills is, indeed, the principal basis on which modern professions claim social recognition and economic rewards". Larson terms this exclusive right over a field of endeavour an "occupational service monopoly", and to sustain such a monopoly a profession must have public recognition (p. 38).

The recordkeeping profession may have well-established social principles at some levels, but it is unlikely that these are widely understood by the public. For example, best practice recordkeeping supports accountability and good governance, as well as reducing information risk exposure, in both the public and private sectors. This is demonstrated in the public sector in Australia where recordkeeping practice is based on best practice frameworks at the Commonwealth, state and local government levels. However, this role is largely invisible to

the public until allegations of fraud or misgovernance arise in the media. The continuing exposure of public and corporate misgovernance, greed, misconduct and failure (Enron, Ansett, Anderson, Worldcom), have provided many opportunities to make the public more aware of the importance of recordkeeping, as recordkeeping deficiencies or omissions are often highlighted (British Broadcasting Commission, (BBC) 2002; Kaufman, 2002; McKemmish, 1998). Pemberton (1998: 7) maintains that for a profession to be recognised by society its "value system must have relevance to values and concerns held by members of society outside the profession". This is certainly not the case in recordkeeping.

Despite the recognition of social relevance at some levels, for example, in issues such as accountability and corporate governance, such recognition is not rated highly by most stakeholders. In fact, social relevance and public recognition was rated at the bottom of the list of criteria identifying a profession by all stakeholder groups. Similarly, public recognition of recordkeeping as a distinct field or discipline area is very low. A high proportion of those surveyed (85%) did not understand basic terminology identifying recordkeeping. The majority of those understanding the terms were currently employed in the public service. It appears that outside the public sector the recordkeeping field is largely unknown, and even in the public sector where it is better known, the image is low and it is not usually considered a profession. This level of recognition by the public indicates that social recognition and acceptance of recordkeeping as a profession is low.

The RMAA and the ASA are developing their advocacy roles and as part of this role provide points of contact on recordkeeping issues of import to government and the media, in an endeavour to raise the public profile of recordkeeping. However, due to the largely volunteer nature of professional bodies this has not been on any regular or consistent basis. For example, in 2005, the RMAA issued five press releases on recordkeeping issues that had appeared in the media and about the same number in 2006. The ASA concentrates on making submissions to parliament and other appropriate bodies on recordkeeping issues.

When applying the data gathered from the professional literature of recordkeeping, the official publications of the relevant stakeholder groups, such as annual reports and websites, stakeholder surveys (recordkeeping employers, employees, regulators, educators and trainers, recruitment consultants, and associations), and the survey of the general public to the criterion of *social relevance and recognition by the public* it can be said that the recordkeeping field does not yet meet the criterion sufficiently to be considered a profession. A consistent and more unified approach by the recordkeeping associations would provide a stronger advocate for the recordkeeping field.

3.   Domain-specific body of knowledge or theory base

Whatever the definition of a profession, research agrees (Abbott, 1988; Hatch, 1988; Perkman, 2005) that one indicator of a *profession* is a body of domain-specific core knowledge and theory. This body of knowledge or theory base in turn is founded on a reiterative process of rigorous research and theory development.

Like many disciplines, recordkeeping has developed from a number of other disciplines such as management, librarianship, information management, sociology, communication theory and computer science. Liles, Johnson and Mead (1997: 480) argued that other disciplines provide the basis of new disciplines, as they emerge "from the need to solve new problems that are not fully addressed by existing disciplines. Emerging disciplines build upon the knowledge, subject matter, methods, tools, and theories of existing reference disciplines".

Larson (1977: 40) asserts that the "codification of professional knowledge is the basis on which a professional 'commodity' can be made distinct and recognizable to the potential publics…. The more formalized the cognitive basis, the more the profession's language and

knowledge appear to be connotation-free and 'objective'" to those outside the profession. Liles, Johnson and Meade (1997: 479) also stress that to be recognised as a profession there must be sufficient about the field of study to distinguish it from others, and it should have a have a "unique fundamental question or focus of study. A discipline emerges to help answer the question through its goals and objectives". The question should have enough substance to sustain a field of study and remain valid despite change in the professional environment. A profession with a valid focus of study should be able to address, control and manage change rather than simply respond to it.

What is the fundamental question or professional primacy which differentiates *recordkeeping* from others forms of information management? Is it the "corpus of knowledge deemed necessary to manage recorded information effectively from the moment it is conceived?" (Pederson, 2005: 69). The recordkeeping field does revolve around the design, capture, and management of records for as long as they are required. At the broadest level it includes a social commitment to assure access and free flow of information, an opposition to censorship and concealment, and at the same time support for the right to privacy, support for good corporate governance, and compliance with regulatory requirements, and so forth.

There is much debate in the literature about the existence of a specific body of recordkeeping theory to inform method and practice (Buckland, 1994; Eastwood, 1995; MacNeil, 1994; Pemberton, 1991, 1992; Walters, 1995; Yusof & Chell, 2002). Much depends on the disciplinary background of the commentator and whether or not archives and records management are accepted as a single discipline area, *recordkeeping*. Some believe that the theory base of recordkeeping is underdeveloped or impoverished (Pemberton, 1991; Buckland, 1994) and relies too heavily on theory from other disciplines (Yusof, 1999; Yusof & Chell, 2002), whereas others (Pederson, 2005; Rumschottel, 2001; Walters, 1995) assert that a distinct body of knowledge and theory can be clearly identified. For example, the *records life cycle model* was developed in the 1940s and by the late 1980s and 1990s the *continuum model* was the focus of attention in Australian recordkeeping practice.

Pederson (2005) believes that:

> Recordkeeping practice is increasingly based upon an internationally developed and understood corpus of knowledge deemed necessary to manage recorded information effectively from the moment it is conceived. This evolving knowledge base reflects rigorous research and testing and comprises the general concepts, principles, attitudes, skills, analytical tools and processes that recordkeeping professionals apply to solve problems and manage regimes appropriate to their employer's needs and resources. (p. 69)

All stakeholder groups surveyed indicated that they recognised a domain-specific body of knowledge and theory base for recordkeeping and ranked this attribute very highly in the identification of a profession, ranking it either first or second in importance in the list of six identified criteria. It was noted that the knowledge base required by recordkeeping practitioners depended on the role undertaken as a records practitioner; the higher the level of practitioner, the greater the need for a broad knowledge and theory base. Theory was felt to be important to provide the bigger information management picture in a very dynamic environment, particularly at the strategic levels. Furthermore a specific skill was not necessary in each and every recordkeeping practitioner but rather in the recordkeeping team as a whole to enable the recordkeeping functional area to provide a high level of professional service. It is interesting to note that over half the employers responding to the survey (52.3%) indicated that current recordkeeping teams did not currently possess the collective skills required to implement the requirements of the Western Australian *State Records Act 2000*.

The content analysis of recordkeeping position advertisements in *The West Australian* newspaper also indicated that a significant number of employers recruiting staff, recognised a domain-specific body of knowledge and skill pertaining to recordkeeping (73.4%). These

employers expected recordkeeping practitioners to possess a diverse range of domain-specific recordkeeping knowledge and experience, ranging from basic entry-level processing skills to higher level strategic planning skills relevant to the level of the position.

As noted, the survey of the general public indicated that the respondents were largely unaware of recordkeeping as a profession. Even those few (15%) with some understanding of the relevant terminology such as "records management" or "archives" had a very limited view of any domain-specific body of knowledge or theory base, except as it pertained to "filing" in their role as employees in the public sector.

When applying the data gathered from the professional literature of recordkeeping, the official publications of the relevant stakeholder groups, such as the annual reports and websites, and all the major stakeholder surveys conducted in 2004, as well as the content analysis of recordkeeping advertisements to the criterion of a *domain-specific body of knowledge or theory base,* it can be said that the recordkeeping field does meet the criterion sufficiently to be considered a profession.

4.   Professional education, university level

Definitions and discussions of professions (Abbott, 1988; Flexner, 1915; Hatch, 1988; Larson, 1977) place great emphasis on the transmission of the core body of knowledge, and the attainment of a minimum level of relevant qualifications at the university-level, demonstrated by some credentialling process. Furthermore, education for a discipline should exhibit the unique features that distinguish it from similar areas of study.

Larson (1977: 137) points out that the "unification of training and research in the modern university" was a significant development in professionalisation, as it provided a powerful legitimisation of a profession's claims to a body of specialised knowledge. Abbott (1988: 54) asserts that an academic education confers a recognised status that the same work without a degree does not have. Cunningham (2001) believes that it is only through a solid foundation in all areas of recordkeeping that practitioners can aspire to professional recognition and notes that this can only be achieved through a university level education. Furthermore, he believes that "until there is general agreement on the need for university education, no meaningful unified recordkeeping profession will emerge" (p. 114).

In the past archivists in Australia have tended to have a university level education, usually in history or a broader information science such as librarianship and then acquire their archival skills on the job, usually in a large archival institution. It was posited that the technical aspects of archivy could be "readily grafted onto the existing scholarly and cultural base" (Schaeffer, 1994: 23). Ham (1994) in his recommendations for education for New Zealand archivists and records managers actually suggested that archivists should have a postgraduate university-level education, and records managers a poly-technical (TAFE) education. Piggott (1995) questioned the appropriateness of separate education solutions for archivists (as professionals) and records managers (as para-professionals).

In the past in Australia, the majority of records managers in the public sector have progressed up through the ranks based on experience or come from other information disciplines such as librarianship, and had little formal records management education; it simply wasn't available or even considered necessary. Skills and knowledge were acquired largely on-the-job, through short-term training, or through a technical college course. Pederson, reporting in 1997, noted that because most records staff learnt on-the-job rather than being academically qualified, and because they managed small budgets and dealt with relatively menial tasks (records) they were never accorded the status of a profession. Today another type practitioner is emerging through the higher education system. Of the employees responding to the survey 30.3% had at least one qualification in recordkeeping at the university level, some to the masters degree

level. This is a vast improvement from an earlier survey in 1996 (Pember), when only 9% had a university qualification and 10% had a TAFE diploma or certificate.

Overall recordkeeping stakeholders rated the value of a formal qualification in recordkeeping relatively low in comparison to other criteria identifying a profession. Most stakeholders ranked the criterion fourth or fifth out of six. Almost one-third of employees felt that a relevant qualification was important for career progression, although some practitioners thought it unnecessary as they considered experience equal to any formal qualification. The recordkeeping associations rated the requirement higher than the other stakeholders despite the lack of a requirement for a domain-specific qualification in recordkeeping for recognition of professional status. From its very inception (1975) the ASA has acknowledged the importance of educational levels as well as experience when conferring professional status. Since 1980 it has been mandatory that all members applying for professional status have a university level qualification, although it does not have to be in recordkeeping. Latest figures from the ASA indicate that 91.8% of members have a university-level qualification. The RMAA, although established earlier (1969) has not gone down this traditional educational qualification route to professionalism as the majority of practitioners have learnt on the job and many today still do not see any necessity for a formal education program. The RMAA is currently implementing a major upgrade of the criteria for professional status recognition. A debate at the 2005 National RMAA Convention on the merits of qualifications versus experience excited spirited exchanges between conference attendees.

All stakeholders surveyed identified two levels of practice in recordkeeping: a basic level operational/processing level and a higher strategic level and the requirements for a professional education were linked to these levels of practice.

The content analysis of recordkeeping job advertisements also identified a trend towards a requirement for a formal education, especially for the higher level positions. Over one-third (38%) of the advertisements indicated that a tertiary qualification or progress towards the completion of a tertiary qualification in recordkeeping or a related discipline was required as either an essential or a desirable criterion. This has motivated some practitioners to formalise their on-the-job experience through recognised degrees. For example, a survey of records management graduates conducted in 2001 found that 59% of those completing the undergraduate degree in records management were already working in the recordkeeping field and were studying to become more professional and improve their career prospects (Pember, 2001).

When applying the data gathered from the professional literature of recordkeeping, the official publications of the relevant stakeholder groups, such as annual reports and websites, and all the major stakeholder surveys, as well as the content analysis of recordkeeping position advertisements, to the criterion of a *professional education, university-level,* it can be said that the recordkeeping field does not yet meet the criterion sufficiently to be considered a profession. Lack of a specific requirement by the recordkeeping associations for a recordkeeping qualification at the university level as a determinant of professional status is a major hindrance in the determination of recordkeeping as a profession. A degree in another discipline and/or appropriate CPD can complement but never replace a professional university-level education. This lack will be one of the major issues to be resolved if there is serious intent to professionalise recordkeeping.

5.   Research and theory development agenda

The existence of a research and theory development agenda is essential for recognition as a profession. Liles, Johnson and Meade (1997: 480-1) note that "a discipline should be identifiable with a research community that sustains its own literature". Furthermore, Williamson, Burstein, and McKemmish (2002: 12) note "that it is generally believed that high

quality research assists in improving the status of a profession". Westwood (1998: 49) maintains that an active research output reflects a mature profession that is not afraid to question its practices". As Cox (1990: 14) asserts, research action which attempts to solve problems systematically and empirically and to confirm what other researchers have purported they have already resolved, is required in any profession. Pemberton (1992: 48) also advocates the need for research maintaining that "without research we have only hearsay, conjecture, anecdote, and possibly propaganda. Given sound methodology and a little patience, research can provide answers to specific problems".

There has been an identifiable research agenda for recordkeeping at least as early as 1988, when Cox and Samuels presented their agenda to improve the identification and retention of records of enduring value, and Dowler his research agenda for the availability and use of records. Research agendas have been regularly updated since that time (Piggott, 1998; An & Cook, 2003; McKemmish, Gilliland-Swetland, & Ketelaar, 2005).

The professional literature, both national and international, provides a mechanism for practitioners to keep abreast of research and practice in the field. These publications provide a forum for refereed research debate and scholarly communication. They also provide a record of the development of professional thought over time, and help identify new avenues and opportunities for research (Danbury, 1999). Both the ASA and the RMAA seek to "encourage research and development" in recordkeeping and demonstrate their recognition and support for research in the recordkeeping field by providing funding opportunities for research projects. Both also publish journals. Until very recently only one of these journals was a refereed publication. Consequently most recordkeeping research in Australia in the past has been published in international recordkeeping journals or in library-based journals.

Originally the research literature in the English language was largely of an archival nature, but over the last three decades a number of dedicated records management journals have been established, some of which are refereed. Most of the early literature in recordkeeping focused on descriptive studies, rather than on hard research although this is beginning to change. Practitioners need answers to new problems and many research projects have focussed on electronic recordkeeping, for example, functional requirements for recordkeeping, the long-term preservation of electronic records, and so forth. Funding of research is always an issue, as most research bodies do not yet view recordkeeping as a distinct research discipline.

Recordkeeping stakeholders acknowledged the importance of an active research and theory agenda for a profession by rating the criterion either third or fourth in the ranking of criteria. The recordkeeping associations and the educators and trainers ranked the criterion at a higher level than other stakeholder groups.

When applying the data gathered from the professional literature, and the surveys of the stakeholder groups, to the criterion of the existence of a *research and theory development agenda,* it can be said that the recordkeeping field does meet the criterion sufficiently to be considered a profession. The recordkeeping field has begun to address seriously the need for such research as is demonstrated by the development of research agendas and the growing amount of research reported in the literature. Recordkeeping is becoming recognised as a valid area of research and funded accordingly through major grants, such as those from the Australian Research Council.

6.   Professional subculture, professional association

Also of import in the recognition of an occupation as a profession is the existence of a specific subculture and a dedicated professional organisation to promote and regulate the profession. Flexner notes that: "in the long run, the first, main and indispensable criterion of a profession will be the possession of a professional spirit…" (1915: 590). The subculture provides a

distinct professional identity and cohesion mechanism for members, a common vision of who they are, what they do and where they are going as a profession. The professional subculture, through the professional association will provide a common sense of direction, purpose and aspirations and will embody an expected way of behaving as a member of that particular profession. Wilensky (1964) contends that the emergence of a professional association is one of the earliest indicators of the professionalisation of an occupation as a need is identified for a collective effort to protect the turf of the emerging discipline.

In Australia professional associations for recordkeeping were developed largely in the 1970s from earlier library-based specialisations and as previously noted, there are currently two associations recognised in Australia as peak bodies in the recordkeeping field: the Records Management Association of Australasia (RMAA), and the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA). The debate on the relative roles of archivist and records manager has continued for half a century and one could be forgiven for thinking that the two fields prefer to keep their separate identities. Stuckey of the National Archives of Australia (NAA), re-ignited debate by proffering a challenge to archivists and records managers, to assess the future role of their professional associations. Stuckey sees himself as neither an archivist nor a records manager, but rather as a modern information management professional and suggests that the successful way ahead might be a merger of interests. Stuckey (1999: 130) maintains that the archivist and records manager should both have "a full understanding about current, immediate future and long term future requirements of the records". Some records managers, for example, Ridley (1999: 121-122), felt that archivists were overstepping the professional boundaries, and that the management of current records is a "specialist activity … clearly the responsibility of a records manager". Stuckey is not alone in advocating a more in-depth analysis of the future role of the RMAA and the ASA. Barbara Reed posited her view during a presentation about the proposed amalgamation of the two associations in 2000 (p.3): "It is logical to amalgamate. The continuum framework provides us with a powerful unifying tool for managing records of all ages and in all circumstances. It does not marginalise anyone". Cunningham (1997, 2001) and others continued the debate about a closer relationship and possible merger between the two associations. Cunningham asserts that it is not enough to simply say that continuum thinking automatically converts us to a single recordkeeping profession; words have to be followed by positive and ongoing action.

A *Statement of Joint Purpose and Cooperation* was signed between the two associations in 2005. This memorandum of understanding does not mean an immediate or even eventual merger of the two professional bodies, only time will tell if it is possible to "forge a broad, cohesive and unified recordkeeping church". Cunningham notes that the traditional separation into archives and records management has "encouraged the tendency towards the 'clericalisation' and deskilling of current records management. This has been disastrous both for the records themselves and for those charged with the responsibility of managing the records" (Cunningham, 2001: 111-112). Cunningham believes "marginalisation and irrelevancy beckons those who prefer insularity above the pursuit of beneficial alliances". These types of issues will need resolution before the associations will be able to move to a true shared understanding of the responsibility for recordkeeping across the continuum.

Stakeholder groups acknowledged the importance of a professional subculture as either first, second or third in the ranking of criteria identifying a profession. From the comments made in the surveys and on the RMAA and ASA listservs, and the information available on the RMAA and ASA websites, it is clear that professionalism is a big issue. In an endeavour to be considered a professional rather than an industry association, the RMAA has become a member of *Professions Australia.* Statements such as "we would like to make professional membership compulsory to be allowed to work within the industry" highlights the direction the RMAA Executive is hoping to move in the future.

Although respondent employers recognised the existence of the professional subculture through the payment of corporate membership dues, and time release for professional association activities such as committee or working party involvement, individual practitioner membership of recordkeeping associations was not usually a major issue with them. This was clearly demonstrated by the content analysis of recordkeeping position advertisements, where only 10.1% required eligibility for professional membership of a relevant professional body.

Respondent employees were specifically asked to indicate if they had personal or corporate membership of any associations relevant to recordkeeping. Overall 32.8% were members of an association and 9.8% were members of both associations. The largest group of respondents with association membership (30.3%) were members of the RMAA.

When applying the data gathered from the professional literature of recordkeeping, the official publications of the relevant stakeholder groups, such as annual reports and websites, stakeholder surveys, and the content analysis of recordkeeping advertisements, to the criterion of the existence of *professional subculture which includes a professional association,* it can be said that the recordkeeping field does meet the criterion sufficiently to be considered a profession. However, given the changes in recordkeeping theory and practice, such as a move to continuum thinking, one could also ask how relevant it is to have two separate associations for a "profession" that focuses on a single activity, recordkeeping?

Data summary

When collating data about the different criteria it was possible to rank the criteria by overall importance to the various stakeholders. The existence of a domain-specific knowledge and theory base was ranked first or second by all stakeholders. The importance of a professional subculture and professional body was ranked at second or third or fourth by stakeholders. The importance of shared social values and world view or paradigm ranked at third or fourth by stakeholders. The importance of an active research and theory development agenda was also ranked at third or fourth by stakeholders. A domain-specific university level professional education was ranked at fourth or fifth by stakeholders. All groups ranked social relevance and recognition as the least important criterion. See Table 2.

Criteria of Professional Model	Ranking
Domain-specific body of knowledge or theory base	1
Professional sub-culture, professional body	2
Shared societal values and worldview or paradigm	3
Research and theory development agenda	3
Professional education, university level	5
Social relevance, social recognition	6

Table 2: Overall stakeholder ranking of importance of each criterion identified in the model of a profession

When applying the data about recordkeeping to the model of a profession, recordkeeping cannot be classed as a profession, as it does not yet meet all six criteria of the model. Although data gathered from the professional literature, the official publications of the relevant stakeholder groups, such as annual reports and websites, extensive stakeholder

surveys, and the content analysis of recordkeeping advertisements, indicates a recognition of shared societal values and worldview, the existence of a domain-specific body of core knowledge and theory, the development of a research and theory development agenda and a professional subculture, it clearly shows that social relevance and public recognition is very low. In addition the move to a domain-specific university level education is also very slow. At best, one could say that recordkeeping is moving further along the *occupation-profession continuum*. And this can only be said if one considers records management and archives as part of a single profession, *recordkeeping*. See Table 3.

Criteria of Professional Model	Ranking
Shared societal values and worldview or paradigm	Yes
Social relevance, social recognition	No
Domain-specific body of knowledge or theory base	Yes
Professional education, university level	No
Research and theory development agenda	Yes
Professional sub-culture, professional body	Yes

Table 3: Assessment of recordkeeping as a profession using the criteria identified in the model of a profession

The way forward?

Although there has been much change in recordkeeping, there is a lag in the development of recordkeeping as a profession. In less than a century, recordkeeping practice has developed from a relatively low-level, largely non-professional, administrative activity into a highly regulated corporate necessity in an environment of rapid technological evolvement and constantly changing corporate structures, management styles, and juridical contexts and requirements. In an effort to cope with the demands of these changes recordkeeping theory has evolved from the divisive legacy of the life cycle to the continuum approach. Many recordkeeping professionals realise that both archivists and records managers are responsible for *the record,* and management must be co-ordinated across time and space to maximise operational efficiency and corporate decision-making, minimise corporate risk, and ensure the survival of long-term value records for posterity. International standards based on continuum theory have been developed for best practice recordkeeping. Better educated, more highly skilled practitioners are required to meet the demands of higher-level expectations. At the same time, the need remains for lower level operational staff. Little has actually changed for the majority of base-level recordkeeping practitioners. This study indicated that over 70% of recordkeeping practitioners in the state public sector in Western Australia still operate at the day-to-day processing level. It also showed that all stakeholders surveyed, saw a clear division between these two levels of recordkeeping staff, and it is only at the higher staffing levels that there is any recognition of professionalism.

One of the major problems to be overcome as a profession is the general invisibility of the recordkeeping field to society as a whole. When surveyed, 85% of the general public had no understanding of terms such as recordkeeping. Recognised professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and teachers provide services readily identifiable to the public; recordkeepers do not as recordkeeping is performed largely as an internal agency or corporate role. Given the continuing instances of recordkeeping failure reported in the media it should not be difficult

to articulate and publicise the social values of the recordkeeping field such as the public service aspect, particularly if the two associations in the recordkeeping field can demonstrate a more active and unified approach to advocacy, and practitioners themselves could become more involved in advocacy issues.

Although essential to recognition as a profession, a domain-specific university-level qualification is not rated highly by stakeholder groups. Stakeholder requirements for a professional qualification are linked largely to level of practice and it is only at the higher levels that it is considered important. Recruitment of recordkeeping staff is a major problem, particularly at the higher levels. The poor image of recordkeeping is a recurring theme and it is only through a concerted effort by all stakeholder groups that this will change. Pederson (2005: 58) notes that records managers are hampered by the continuing perception of them "as filing clerks, a reliance on short-term, or on-the-job, rather than tertiary training".

If employers want quality higher-level staff they will need to insist on appropriate qualifications when recruiting staff. Even the recordkeeping associations, who grant "professional status" to practitioners, do not insist on a mandatory domain-specific university-level qualification. Tinkering with CPD programs is no substitute for a professional education. Recordkeeping will never be considered a profession unless those at the "professional" level have a domain-specific university-level education. A serious commitment to phasing in such an educational requirement is essential. When employers can be assured that professional status means appropriately qualified and experienced, the image of recordkeeping should begin to change. Furthermore, without a requirement for a specific university level qualification in recordkeeping as the entry point to professional status, the recordkeeping bodies are not playing the traditional role of gatekeeper, as do most professional associations.

Although fledgling, research into recordkeeping issues is growing through national and international funding initiatives. Practitioners themselves can help build this body of knowledge through collaboration in research projects with academic colleagues, and subsequent publication of the results in refereed journals. Again, this is something that could be addressed more successfully by a unified recordkeeping association that is serious about being regarded as a professional body rather than a trade or industry body.

All stakeholders identified a professional subculture for recordkeeping; however, the professional subculture identified is fractured in two, considerably weakening the whole. In the modern recordkeeping environment of the *continuum,* where the distinction between records and archival theory and practice disappears, one can no longer divorce the two; it appears that marriage is inevitable and probably desirable from a professional point of view. In isolation, neither association meets the criteria for true professional recognition. There is no doubt that amalgamation of the two recordkeeping associations would provide a stronger unified focus for the professionalism of the recordkeeping field. All criteria that distinguish an occupation from a profession would be considerably enhanced by a unification of the RMAA and the ASA. Furthermore, the two criteria identified in the model of a profession, not currently being met (public recognition and domain-specific university level qualification), could be addressed more effectively by a stronger unified association. It is not until these criteria are met that recordkeeping can recognised as a profession, and the recordkeeping associations can be considered as truly professional associations.

Conclusion

The development of a profession requires deliberate and sustained strategic planning and action on the part of those practising in the field. There is no doubt that recordkeeping has changed considerably over the past 20 years. However, at best one can say that recordkeeping has moved along the *occupation-profession continuum*. The recordkeeping field is predicated

on a core body of domain-specific knowledge and this knowledge and theory base is being further developed through a budding research agenda. The recordkeeping field does have a shared worldview in theory, if not in practice. Recordkeeping does have social relevance, even if this social relevance is not widely recognised by the public. Although professional education is available at the university level for the transmission of the core knowledge and theory, few practitioners are educated to this level. And although recordkeeping is now recognised largely as a single inclusive field of endeavour, in practice, a dual professional subculture exists: one for records practitioners and one for archivists. Perhaps the time is right for the recordkeeping field to consider seriously, amalgamation into a single professional association. Until the professional associations become serious in their efforts to create a single association for recordkeeping and the criteria for professional status is raised to a level which includes a domain-specific university qualification, recordkeeping will not be considered a profession, when evaluated against the traditional criteria of professions. The creation of a larger and potentially more powerful association with a single voice would demonstrate clearly a unity of vision and purpose and provide a stronger advocate on recordkeeping issues in the public arena. This is not a new proposal. From time to time over the past 50 years such an amalgamation has been suggested. Although the two associations have skirted the issue no serious intent to amalgamate is evident to date. An amalgamation under a single recordkeeping banner does not necessarily mean a loss of identity for those wishing to retain their identity as "records manager" or "archivist". Many professions, for example medicine, have discrete specialities under the holistic banner of "medicine", but still retain an overall worldview.

The professional associations have a key role to play in raising the occupation of recordkeeping to that of a profession. The greatest challenge to the further professionalisation of recordkeeping may well be resistance from the associations and individual members themselves.

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