Working from home: The experience of records management professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic

Abstract (max 250 words)

Purpose: The international research team co-authoring this article set out to investigate how recordkeepers in Canada, Finland, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Iceland, and Italy, experienced accomplishing their tasks from home over varying lengths of time during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology: A multilingual survey including 44 questions was designed and administered to the six countries identified above in 2022. This research was preceded by an environmental scan looking at existing studies considering archival and records management responses to the pandemic.

Findings: The impact of working from home on recordkeeping and, more generally, work performance was perceived differently by the survey respondents depending on various factors. The study also identified a number of similarities across countries, such as an increased awareness of the importance of records management shared by organizational actors. Surprisingly, the pandemic did not appear to have a great impact on the perceived quality of records management.

Originality: This is the first study aiming to capture records professionals' perceptions of their role while working from home during the pandemic.

Keywords: Recordkeeping, New Normal, Flexible Work, Paradigm Shift, Lockdown, Remote Working

Article classification: Research Article

Introduction
The global COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the world economy and our social structures in ways that were unimaginable before 2020. The consequences of these disruptions are yet to be fully assessed. Suddenly, at different points in time in different countries, "business as usual" was no longer an option, and organizations, communities and individuals found themselves developing new processes and workarounds to continue to accomplish their core functions in a profoundly transformed environment. The existence of a digital infrastructure allowed activities that were

already partly conducted online or that could be "dematerialized" to shift to completely virtual or hybrid modalities. Studies show that in such unprecedented times existing digital services were extended and new ones were rolled out, often in great haste (Papagiannidis *et al.*, 2020). This also offered an opportunity for transformative change as the pandemic accelerated the process of digital transformation that was already underway in most Western countries (Garcia-Contreras *et al.*, 2021; Mergel *et al.*, 2019). For many people, the physical workplace ceased to be their daily destination and was replaced by their home, as many employees were asked to work from home or to reduce their working hours due to social distancing measures (Moser-Plautz and Schmidthuber, 2023).

Extensive research has been conducted worldwide to gain insight into the experience of those working from home due to COVID-19. Much of this research was based on surveys. The focus of these projects was generally the impact of working from home on the quality of life, the quality of work, the balance between private life and work, the perception of health, the perception of productivity, the influence of environmental factors with impact on working from home (Etheridge *et al.*, 2020; van Ballegooijen *et al.*, 2021; George *et al.*, 2022; Salamone *et al.*, 2021; Mehdi and Morissette, 2021; Kitagawa *et al.*, 2021; Seva *et al.*, 2021). Some studies also aimed to understand whether the "massive social experiment of working from home" (Barrero *et al.*, 2021) caused by COVID-19 would bring lasting changes in the preferences of how employees would like to organize their work in the future (Yang *et al.*, 2023; Mehdi and Morissette, 2021; Barrero *et al.*, 2021; Oo *et al.*, 2023). Papagiannidis *et al.* (2020) found that while technology had advanced rapidly it was "an enabler [for working from home], but not necessarily the main driving force" as its availability did not translate into good practice. They noted that many employees struggled with connectivity due to limited bandwidth expansion. These employees also lacked the sufficient knowledge and support to enable their systems to make use of basic and advanced hardware they had brought home from the workplace, so that they could continue work during lockdowns. They also found that organizations and employees were, to some extent, "accidentally prepared" as the use of common enterprise platforms such as Office 365 meant that "online and collaborative tools were already licenced and available"(Papagiannidis *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, Moser-Plautz and Schmidthuber (2023) who studied digital transformation within ten Austrian federal administration organizations found out that these organizations greatly benefited from digital transformation. In short, the pandemic activated resources that the organizations already had [enterprise platforms and basic digital skills]. This led to an increase in job satisfaction and motivation at an individual level for employees as people lost their fear of trying new ways of working and experienced the functionality of digital tools for collaboration and communication. Employees also became more aware of cyber security and information security even though not all organizations participating in this study had a written strategy for digital transformation. There are numerous studies on working from home in general, but very little research has been done on the impact of working from home that focuses specifically on the domain of recordkeeping. In a recent study, Wendelken (2023) analysed the recordkeeping response of archival authorities to the COVID pandemic in New Zealand. Her results showed that the guidance provided by these authorities was unlikely to have supported the physical change of work environment experienced by employees and the consequent rapid changes in organisational systems and processes required for sustained remote working. These changes

could result in organisational, social and cultural impacts. She suggests that recordkeeping practice could be "anticipated as a concurrent concern and one that could have far-reaching ramifications over time" (Wendelken, 2023).

As recordkeeping researchers, we set out to find out how working from home or remotely during the initial years of the pandemic impacted the management of organizational records in different countries. We were particularly interested in records professionals' views of the factors that might have supported or hindered the performance of their tasks from home during the periods of "lockdown", and how their role and the function of managing records might have changed because of the radical and unexpected transformation of work practices caused by the pandemic.

As a first step, we conducted an environmental scan of published resources dealing with adjustments in working conditions that affected the way records and archives had been managed in the initial stages of the pandemic. This preliminary study focused on English language materials, including industry reports, surveys, and literature from various disciplines, as well as official guidance provided from national archives, published in the period March 2020-July 2021. Findings showed that much attention had been paid to documenting the pandemic (e.g., collecting and preserving social media discussion, promoting the use of diaries by citizens). However, the provision of advice and standards for creating, managing, and preserving organizational records, at a time when regular access to organizational systems could not be guaranteed, was largely missing (Foscarini *et al.*, 2022).

The outcome from this first study motivated the development of an online survey, entitled "Records Management and COVID-19: Towards a 'new normal'," the primary purpose of which was to investigate how archives and records professionals experienced accomplishing their tasks from home over varying lengths of time. The survey was administered via Qualtrics by the Social Science Research Institute of the University of Iceland between May and July 2022, and involved five countries: Canada, Iceland, Italy, The Netherlands, and New Zealand. These countries were selected based on research team affiliations and their language capabilities. In November to December 2022 the survey was extended to Finland.

In this article, after a section on research methods, we present an analysis of the survey findings focussing on the responses to the questions that have provided the most significant comparative data. The section on survey findings is followed by a broader discussion of the results of the study. In an appendix to this article, readers may find the English version of the full survey.

Methodological Note
As mentioned above, the decision to undertake an online survey was motivated by findings from our preliminary environmental scan (Foscarini *et al.*, 2022). The goal of the survey was to gain insight into experiences and perspectives of recordkeeping practitioners in the researchers' countries. The survey was designed collectively by the research team and was subject to several iterations, as questions had to be adjusted to the recordkeeping practices existing in each country and relevant terminology. Questions for the multilingual study were initially formulated in English and subsequently translated into Dutch, French, Icelandic, Italian, and Finnish. Following ethics

approval from the home universities of the authors of this article, links to the online survey in multiple languages were distributed by means of national or local archival and records management listservs, social media platforms, and other dedicated channels.

The survey contained 44 questions, of which 26 were closed, 13 Likert scale and 5 open-ended. An "Other" option included in some of the questions allowed participants to comment or elaborate on their answers. The introductory section of the survey collected data about location of respondents and type of workplace, job title, age, gender, and average time used to travel to and from work. Following the demographics and background section, the survey focused on the participants' experience before the pandemic, during the most acute phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequent returns to business as usual. Final questions asked about the general experience of the participants in relation to the support they received from co-workers and managers, their perceptions of being valued or not valued for their professional skills, and whether they thought that they could fulfill the requirements of their jobs. All open-ended comments and answers written in languages other than English were first translated into English using an online translation service, so that everyone in the team could read them and identify themes and patterns. Subsequently, the translations were analyzed by the team members whose mother tongue was the one of the responses, to ensure that the meaning and tone of the original answers had been delivered correctly in the English language. The selection of themes and the coding of the results was done collectively.

It should be emphasized that translation was an essential component of our method, as from the outset of our research, we recognized that the use of the English language would be a barrier for some survey respondents. We also wanted to avoid suggesting equivalences that do not exist in the real world (for instance, among job titles, or among records management practices and systems). Some of the terms used in the English version of the survey had different meanings in different contexts, including the two Anglophone countries, and for some terms, we faced translatability issues in Dutch, Icelandic, Italian, Finnish or French (note that we opted for Canadian French, as the survey was to be distributed in Canada). Holmes (1988) states that what the translator strives for is finding counterparts or matchings, i.e., words or segments of a phrase that are closely akin, though never truly equivalent, to the functions in the language of the translation. The translators, in this case the individual members of the research team, made every effort to compare and combine the use of terms to make the six language versions of the survey similar enough and understandable by participants in their specific contexts.

Findings
A total of **391** valid responses were collected, broken down by country as follows: The Netherlands (**134**), Iceland (**95**), New Zealand (**52**), Italy (**41**), Finland (**36**) and Canada (**33**). Findings are reported below according to the survey section, only broken down by country where significant differences were noted. Where specific questions are referred to these are indicated using the number sign (#)

Demographics and Background

The demographics and background section produced a snapshot of how respondents identified and the type of organization they worked for which was largely unsurprising and consistent across the countries surveyed. Over half of the participants in our survey were within the age range of 31-50 years old, while a third were between 51-60 years old. Nobody was under 20 years old. Only 22 individuals (6%) were 30 years old or younger, and 49 were older than 60 (13%) (#5).

More interesting is the data about the gender our respondents identified with (#6). 70% of the total participants identified as female, 25% as male, and 2% as other (some preferred not to answer this question). In terms of employment sector, more than 80% of all respondents were employed in the public sector, less than 10% in the private sector, and fewer answered "other" to the question about the type of organization they worked with (#2).

There was one demographic question that deserves further explanation; this question concerns the participants' job title (#3) and revealed differences in the ways that participating countries name roles, possibly also suggesting different understandings of the position titles. More than 24% of the respondents called themselves archivists, 22% records managers, 17% information managers, and 32% described themselves as 'other'. There were large differences between the countries. In Italy, 75% of the respondents called themselves an archivist and no one identified as a records manager. This is because in the Italian language, the term "*archivista*" encompasses both the records professionals in charge of the management of current records ("*archivio corrente*") and those responsible for archived materials ("*archivio storico*"). In New Zealand, the proportion of archivist vs. records manager was 12% and 14% respectively, in Iceland 13% and 38%, and in Finland 14% and 6%. If we look at the respondents who answered 'other', it is striking that in the Netherlands (with 33% other) and New Zealand (46% other) they were predominantly consultants ("*adviseur*") and executives ("*informatiemanager*"), while in Iceland (27% other) they were largely quality managers and a combination of two job titles records- and quality manager ("*gæðastjóri & skjala- og gæðastjóri*"). In Finland no professional title was dominant. Most common "other" titles inserted were a generic "planner" and "analyst" ("*suunnittelija*"). Further investigation would be required to better understand what these different designations mean in practice and whether they are reflective of differing information cultures and values.

Working from home
The "working from home" section was designed to gain understanding of what the initial shift to working from home looked like and to understand the variabilities of that experience. In the first instance, the survey sought to learn the extent to which information professionals worked from home during the pandemic in terms of duration and intensity, and how this was valued by them (#8 and #9). While the vast majority of respondents (more than 90%) reported that they worked from home for periods of time during the pandemic, there were significant differences between the countries. The two extremes were Iceland and the Netherlands. In Iceland less than 5% of the respondents had to work from home for more than 12 months, while in the Netherlands, this was the case for more than 70% of the respondents. It was noted that working from home caused numerous practical problems, such as finding a suitable workspace and the necessary equipment to carry out the work.

Two-thirds of all respondents said that they were able to create a workplace at their homes. There were however some remarkable differences between the countries. For example, more than half of the Italian respondents indicated that they did not have a designated workspace, while for the Dutch this was only the case for one fifth. Where respondents indicated that they did not have a suitable workspace at home, the same pattern is evident in all countries: respondents had to resort to the dining or kitchen table, a bedroom, or set up a temporary corner somewhere in the house (#12). People reported that sometimes they had to move from one place to another during the day, e.g., from living room to kitchen table or bedroom, depending, as one Canadian respondent said, on "how many folks [are] working from home at the same time as me". Having to work with small laptop screens for long periods of time could be tiring, and as one person wrote, to make it a bit more comfortable "I sometimes stole an extra screen from the kids" ["*og stal stundum auka skjá af börnunum*"].

Especially at the beginning of the pandemic, many people experienced inadequate equipment (#16). Over time though, they managed to improve home facilities to the extent that a significant portion of respondents eventually rated the equipment at home as good (28%) or even better (9%) than at the office. Still, around 80% of the Icelandic respondents, 70% of the Finnish respondents and 60% of the respondents from Canada, Italy and New Zealand said that the home office was less well-equipped than the real office. In the Netherlands the response rate for the home office being less equipped was 48%. For those working predominantly with digital information, the most important equipment consisted of a stable and fast internet connection, adequate computer equipment, and the ability to log into the digital records management systems, in addition to a comfortable office chair. In most cases, except for Italy and Finland, the necessary equipment to work from home was purchased by the employer (#29). The majority of Italian respondents indicated that the required technology or materials to enable "smart working" (the phrase used in Italy to talk about working from home) were not provided by their employers. In Finland, only a quarter of respondents who needed new equipment said that it was provided by the organization. Unsurprisingly, where employees required access to the physical archive in order to perform tasks, the work came to a standstill. "The handling of requests from the archive is not possible at home" ["*afhandelen van verzoekvragen uit het archief is thuis niet mogelijk*"] as a Dutch archivist noted. A senior information advisor from New Zealand explained, "my work focuses on indexing and archiving physical items some of which are large. It is very inconvenient to move such items and [find] space to work on them at home." Lack of access to repositories and holdings presented challenges to information professionals when there was no easy way to translate that work to a solely digital alternative and when moving collections, in whole or in part, beyond the security of the organization, was neither possible nor appropriate.

The quality of working from home was measured not only by the available workspace and equipment, but also by the ability to concentrate. Many respondents experienced great benefits from working from home, finding it much quieter at home than at the office. This, however, was dependent on the individual circumstances of each respondent. Just as some people enjoyed the relative peace of working from home, others were less fortunate in this respect. One respondent complained, "[w]e are a couple with four teenagers and three dogs, this is not exactly a quiet home as it is (…) in addition, the spouse worked a lot at home and it was disturbing" ["Við erum

hjón með fjóra unglinga og þrjá hunda, þetta er ekki beint rólegt heimili eins og staðan er í dag (…) auk þess vann makinn mikið heima og það var truflandi".]. There was an intersection of respondents' multiple everyday lives that made the conduct of work more challenging. Equally one Dutch respondent noted that it was difficult to separate the many roles she performed at home "employee, partner, mother and during the lockdown also a schoolteacher" ["*werknemer, partner, moeder en tijdens de lockdown ook nog juf*"]. The problem of role ambiguity when working from home was often (mostly by women) raised. A records manager from Iceland responded that "it's easy to get caught up in household chores, putting in the washing machine and the like when you're at home anyway" ["*Auðvelt að detta aðeins í heimilisverkin, setja í þvottavél og þess háttar fyrst maður er á annað borð heima*"], or as a records manager at an international organization put it, her *"spouse works out of the home, so all house-related tasks (cleaning, meeting with handymen, etc.) fall to me".*

From the survey results, it appears that working from home made people more aware of the challenges that existed in their office work environments. People were especially aware of the noise and the many distractions (e.g., telephone, chatty colleagues) present in the office. Sharing the office space with several colleagues and the resulting annoyances were often mentioned. For example, a Dutch records manager did not hide her dissatisfaction with an "open workplace with a lot of noise in the hallway, talking colleagues, compulsory socializing, coffee rounds by colleagues, etc." ["*open werkplek met veel ruis op de gang, pratende collega's, verplicht socializen, koffierondes door collega's etc*."]. Similar grievances were described by a records manager from New Zealand, who wrote "I work in an open plan office so can hear others talking/meeting, and our workspace is close to the shared kitchen space. We have a designated 'quiet time' of half a day each week in the office where talking/meeting in shared spaces is prohibited". One Finnish respondent said that "there were problems when the spouse also worked at home and we both had confidential discussions. It was tricky. I usually went to the children's room to talk" ["*Ongelmia tuli silloin, jos työskentelimme puolison kanssa molemmat kotona ja molemmilla oli jotain luottamuksellista. Se oli aika kikkailua: itse menin silloin yleensä lapsen huoneeseen puhumaan*"]. A fifth of Finnish respondents indicated an open office plan as a cause of disturbance at the workplace.

Many respondents appreciated working remotely in terms of quietness, but when we look at the most frequently mentioned problems with working from home, we see that many suffered from the lack of personal contact with colleagues. This was sometimes for very practical reasons, because personal contact was necessary to carry out the tasks, "the necessity to do some teamwork" ["*la necessità di svolgere alcuni lavoro in equipe*"], "lack of physical contact with colleagues to solve work problems" ["[la mancanza di] *contatto con i colleghi per risolvere problemi di lavoro*"] or "lack of access to archival material [at home] and direct rapport with colleagues" ["*mancanza del materiale archivistico e del confronto diretto con i colleghi*"], as some Italian archivists indicated. But personal contact with colleagues at work was also important for other reasons. A Dutch records manager found "home office" "too quiet, not enough input, too little creativity" ["*te rustig, te weinig input, te weinig creativiteit*"], and an information manager from New Zealand denounced the "reduced opportunity for serendipity/watercooler

conversations etc.". Some also mentioned higher energy costs to heat the house as a disadvantage of working from home.

Working from home in terms of productivity, workload, and preferences
For most information professionals, working remotely was not a completely new experience (#21). Before the pandemic, many people were already partially or fully working from home on a modest scale, although there were major differences per country. About 50% of the respondents from the Netherlands and Finland indicated that they already partially worked from home before the pandemic, while this was only around 25% in New Zealand and Canada. The highest percentage of respondents who reported that no one in the organization was allowed to work from home prior to the pandemic was in Italy, with a 45% score, compared to a 6% in the Netherlands.

Considering working from home experiences during the pandemic, respondents were largely positive about their "productivity" (a term that we did not define, so that participants would not feel restrained by either positive or negative interpretations). Generally, more than half of the respondents rated their own productivity even higher at home than in the office, although for a significant proportion of them this also meant that they worked more hours at home than in the office. Only a small proportion of respondents (less than 15%) thought they were less productive at home than at the office. Finland was an exception in part. Of the Finnish respondents, 40% said that they accomplished more at home, and for many (36%) working remotely did not imply any changes in their productivity. The fact that working from home often results in accomplishing more does not necessarily mean that the effectiveness of this arrangement is in fact greater.

For just over half of the respondents across all countries, the perceived workload when working from home hardly changed (#19). Only a very small group (approximately 10%) indicated that remote working had reduced their workload, while approximately one third believed that their workload had increased to a large extent. For a small group, with a slightly larger proportion of women than men, their workload had increased even to a very large extent. This finding confirms that gender plays an important role in workload perceptions when office duties are added to pre-existing domestic duties.

Interestingly, a large majority of the respondents found working from home beneficial (#20). Around 80% indicated that they would like to continue working (partly) at home in the future, even if there is no longer any necessity. Differences between countries were small in this respect. The most striking difference was that the respondents from Iceland, more than from all other countries, indicated that they would not want to continue working from home if there was no longer a medical need. A possible explanation for the relatively high percentage of respondents from Iceland (30%) not wanting to continue working from home could be that there are hardly any commute times (#7) compared to some other countries. More than 90% of the respondents from Iceland have less than half an hour travel time to the office.

Working prior to the pandemic

Results discussed in this section revealed that almost half of the respondents were using a combination of digital and non-digital means for their daily work prior to the pandemic (#22). Respondents in Iceland, New Zealand and the Netherlands claimed to be using mostly digital means. In Finland and Canada, a little less than a third said that the work in the organization had been mostly digital. Non-digital ways of working were more common in Italy, where most respondents identified as archivists in charge of the custody of paper records.

Participants were also asked about what electronic document/records management systems were being used at their organizations prior to the pandemic (#23). They could choose between five different popular platforms or put in their particular system. A list of 276 singular answers was analysed, and the most common names of systems mentioned were SharePoint, which had the highest score, GoPro [commonly used in Iceland], Content Server, Document Management System and Zaaksysteem [commonly used in the Netherlands]. Other products were not mentioned as frequently.

All Finnish respondents and more than half of the respondents from the Netherlands, Iceland and New Zealand claimed that there had been no change at all in the systems being used for records management during the pandemic (#24). The opposite seemed to occur in Canada, where 57% of the respondents observed that the pandemic caused some notable changes in the tools used to manage records. Primarily, Canadian respondents referred to the wide-spread adoption of MS Teams, and one individual commented: "SharePoint has been implemented, but mainly just as a rushed migration."

The numbers are dramatically different when it comes to identifying cloud-based collaboration systems used before and during the pandemic (#25 and #26). Over half of the respondents across all countries perceived that the cloud-based systems being used had changed. When asked to specify the kind of change experienced, many participants provided the name of a particular cloud-based system, and mostly they claimed to be implementing or increasing the use of MS Teams, Zoom, SharePoint, OneDrive, or the whole Microsoft 365 apps suite.

Working during the pandemic
The results regarding working arrangements during the pandemic indicate that at least half of the overall respondents had to go to their "real office" during the pandemic to accomplish tasks that could not be performed remotely, while a smaller part did not (#27). The extremes can be found in Canada where a vast majority of the respondents (73%) said they had to go to the office, the same applied to 61% of the Finnish respondents while a smaller part of the participants from Iceland (38%) did.

Respondents were asked (#30) what kinds of provisions regarding records management were made to support employees while working from home. The question offered some options they could choose from, including: a records management policy, guidelines, regulations or instructions for working from home; a helpdesk; and/or specific training to facilitate working from home. Almost a third of the participants across all countries – except for Finland – indicated that there had been no provisions at all to support employees while working from home during

the pandemic. Almost half of the Finnish respondents and approximately a third of the respondents from Canada, New Zealand, Iceland, and the Netherlands mentioned that they were provided with records management guidelines, while just a quarter of the respondents from Italy indicated that formal regulations or instructions had been made available for employees in "smart working".

Respondents were also invited to use a subsequent open-ended question (#31) to elaborate on what they thought their organization should have implemented to support the management of records and information from home. While for some respondents, primarily from Canada and the Netherlands, claimed that "there was little disturbance moving to a WFH [working from home] model", as "everything was already set up", others lamented the lack of training on the use of MS Teams and Office 365 more generally. As cautiously recognized by a Dutch respondent: "In principle, the systems that were used before working from home could also be accessed from home. There was therefore no obstacle to continuing to work in those systems. There should have been more guidelines for working with Teams (and storing documents within Teams/SharePoint) and whether to use email" ["*In principe waren de systemen die gebruikt werden vóór het thuiswerken ook vanuit huis te benaderen. Er was daarom geen belemmering om verder te werken in die systemen. Er hadden meer richtlijnen moeten komen voor het werken met Teams (en opslag van documenten binnen Teams/SharePoint) en het al dan niet gebruiken van de mail*"]. One Canadian respondent pointed out that "[s]ystems were implemented (SharePoint, Teams) without records management requirements assessed or understood" – a comment that resonated with most records professionals in all countries. Another major shortcoming identified across was the little attention paid to security. "Archives security; risk management" ("*Archives Sécurité; Gestion du risqué*") would be major pain points, according to a French-Canadian participant.

Respondents could choose between a few options (multiple choice) when replying to question (#32) about the procedures that were not allowed while working from home. The list included, among other options, printing organizational records, using a private device (computer or laptop), saving records from the office on private accounts such as Dropbox or Google Docs, keeping paper-based documents at home, using cloud services for exchanging records. The responses were similar in all countries. Less than half (40%) of the general responses indicated that employees were not allowed to save organizational records on proprietary systems and a third (30%) claimed that they were not allowed to keep organizational paper-based documents at home.

Question (#33) focused on the information security aspect, asking whether organizations issued new policies or practices to ensure the security of records while working from home. The general response was overwhelmingly negative, particularly in Finland (72 %), Iceland (66%) and New Zealand (61%). The issue of information security was also addressed in other parts of the survey, which are discussed in the next section.

Quality of records management

Interestingly, half of the overall respondents to question #34 stated that they did not perceive any significant differences on the quality of records management because of working from home. Only approximately a fourth of the respondents argued that the quality of records management had slightly or greatly decreased. At the other end of the spectrum, 8% of the respondents claimed that the quality of records management had greatly increased. Responses from Canada and the Netherlands were the most pessimistic, while participants from the other countries appeared overall less concerned.

When asked to select major shortcomings related to managing records from home (#35), most participants across all countries indicated accessing paper records as the greatest difficulty they experienced (29%). This was followed by the difficulty of adjusting to the home as a workplace (17%), privacy concerns (14%) and reduced access to technology (12%). 14% of the respondents claimed not to have experienced any shortcomings in relation to records management while working from home. Some of those who provided comments using the "Other" option identified the biggest shortcoming in "not being able to engage with colleagues in person - missed the social aspect", an increased use of MS Teams for meetings, and "staff using non-approved document sharing [platforms]".

As having control over organizational records is key to good recordkeeping, we asked our participants whether they felt that this ability was somehow reduced by the restrictions caused by the pandemic (#36). Approximately half (45%) of the respondents recognized that working from home did reduce their ability to control how records were managed; however, an overall 35% of respondents claimed that they did not perceive any changes in their control function, or as a Canadian participant pointed out, "I am not sure my organisation exerts much control over its records at any time". It may be of interest to note that 20% of the respondents were not sure whether their ability to control the records had been reduced or not.

Participants were asked whether (#37) they thought that working from home might have helped raise awareness of the importance of records management in their organizations. Most of the respondents from Italy (57%), New Zealand (55%), and Iceland (39%) thought so. They commented that the emergency had a positive effect "especially in relation to digitization/move towards the creation of digital records" ["*soprattutto relativamente alla digitalizzazione/passaggio a produzione di documenti digitali*"], "it has highlighted the benefits of having information held and available digitally, and ensuring that it is stored where it is accessible to everyone who needs it, and protected from unauthorised activities", and "remote working focused the attention of management and staff on the advantages of saving documents in a file system so that they are accessible" ["*fjarvinnan beindi sjónum stjórnenda og starfsfólks að kostum þess að vista skjöl í skjalakerfi svo þau væru aðgengileg*"]. "They finally realized why we need electronic records management" ["*Tajusivat viimeinkin, miksi se sähköinen asiakirjanhallinta on tarpeen*"], noted a Finnish respondent.

The respondents from the Netherlands were split in their answers, with 35% agreeing that the pandemic contributed to make everyone more aware of the importance of managing records, and 36% responding that it did not change anything. Iceland (32%) and the Netherlands (28%)

had quite many respondents that were unsure about the issue, with Canada having the highest number of unsure (37%) and a very high number of negative responses (33%). Finns were both unsure and positive. Both alternatives were chosen by 36 % of the respondents.

We used a Likert scale to measure how much our study participants agreed or disagreed that the pandemic affected several aspects of their profession and their professional standing within the organization (#40). The results confirm that in general, there is more awareness of the importance and benefits of managing records at all levels in the organization. This, however, does not seem to correspond to records professionals' having gained more trust and respect due to the important role they played during the pandemic. Another significant insight provided by the answers to question (#40) speaks to people's anticipation of what might happen when the COVID-19 emergency is over. Almost 70% of the overall pool of respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that "the 'real office' will never be the same as it was before the pandemic". How our study participants imagined the future of recordkeeping and of their work conditions overall is further described in the next section.

The results from question (#38), regarding whether information security was better or worse in a home office situation in comparison to the workplace differed between countries. The overall results showed that over a third of the respondents found the home and the workplace to be equally secure, while 41% of the overall respondents found that information was less secure or much less secure at home than in the workplace, and as expected, only 18% found it to be more secure or much more secure at home. However, the answers differed quite a bit between the countries. 53% of the Icelandic respondents stated that information was much more or more secure at home than in the workplace, and 29% that it was equally secure. Surprisingly, none of the respondents from Iceland thought that information would be much less secure at home. Participants from Italy, Canada and New Zealand were of a different opinion as their numbers for "more secure at home" were very low and none of them had marked the option "much more secure at home". In the Netherlands, around 46% of the respondents claimed that the information was less secure at home, and 39% thought it would be equally secure at home and in the office. In comparison, half of the Finnish respondents said that home and work were equally secure and almost a third considered home to be less secure.

When asked (#39) to rate the complexity of working from home regarding the confidentiality, integrity, and availability of information, a third (32%) of the overall pool selected "neither complex nor simple". A fifth of the respondents found it to be not that complex, while just over 6% found it very complex. It is perhaps striking that 10% of the participants of the survey were unsure about their experience. 47% of the respondents in Finland and 45% of the respondents in Iceland found the confidentiality, integrity and availability of information while working from home *not* that complex or *not* complex at all. The results were different in the Netherlands and Italy, where respectively the 51% and the 66% of the respondents found it to be complex or very complex.

Our survey concluded with three questions focussing on participants' perceptions of the degree to which they felt valued for their professional skills (#42), the degree to which they felt they

could fulfil their job requirements (#43), and the degree to which they felt supported by their co-workers and/or supervisors (#44). We asked the respondents to reflect on their experiences in general, that is, not considering how their feelings might have changed during the pandemic. Most respondents to question #42 claimed that they felt they were valued rather much, for instance, the Netherlands scored 51%, Iceland 47%, Finland 44 %, Canada 42%, and Italy 28%. In Iceland, 30% of the respondents felt very much valued, as did 25% of the respondents in the Netherlands. 33% of the New Zealander respondents felt they were neither valued much nor little, a result which was higher than in the other countries; still a 31% of New Zealanders felt they were valued rather much and 24% very much. The responses to question #43 were similarly very positive in all countries. A large majority (84%) of the overall respondents stated they could fulfill the requirements of their jobs either "very much" (34%) or "rather much" (50%). Question (#44) attracted the same overwhelmingly positive reaction. The responses were similar between the participating countries and most respondents felt that their co-workers and/or supervisors supported them very or rather much, with the Netherlands scoring 77%, New Zealand 69%, Iceland 67%, Canada 64%, Finland 61% and Italy 60%.

Looking into the future
When asked to elaborate on the kind of impact the experience of working from home might have on post-pandemic records management in organizations (#41), responses in all languages converged on a few themes.

First, our study participants emphasized a strong push towards the digitization of work processes and records. As an Italian respondent put it, "It is no longer possible to postpone the dematerialization process. We have become aware that all levels [in the organization] must be involved in digitization and digital working" *["Non è più possibile rimandare il processo di dematerializzazione. Ci si è resi conto che tutti i livelli devono essere coinvolti nella digitalizzazione"].* An Icelandic participant wrote: "Electronic communication took a huge leap for the better in my opinion. Remote meetings, electronic signatures, security of electronic data transmissions and much more, thanks to the pandemic" *["Rafræn samskipti tóku gríðarlegan kipp til hins góða að mínu mati. Fjarfundir, rafrænar undirskriftir, öryggi sendinga rafrænna gagna og margt fleira, þökk sé heimsfaraldri"].* A more elaborate answer was provided by a Dutch respondent: "I think we need to get rid of the paper paradigm once and for all. We still have a 'paper mindset' and the idea that everything can be managed centrally. Some have known this for some time, but digital (home) working has shown that this does not work. We are still at the beginning of the process, but I think it has contributed to raising awareness among senior management and changes can now be made" *["Ik denk dat we eens en voor altijd afmoeten van het papieren paradigma. We hebben nog steeds een "paper mindset" en het idee dat alles centraal is te beheren. Sommigen weten dit al langer, maar digitaal (thuis) werken heeft laten zien dat dit niet werkt. We staan nog aan het begin van het proces, maar ik denk dat het heeft bijgedragen aan bewustzijn bij hoger management en er nu veranderingen kunnen worden doorgevoerd"].*

Second, many talked about potential problems arising from the rushed implementation of new technologies or new ways of using them, as this Canadian response shows: *"I think we are going*

to be doing a lot of clean up and rationalization of record keeping in the organization. We sent everyone home and rolled out cloud-based technologies without proper governance or training, and there are records everywhere that need to be brought under control". Similarly, a New Zealander participant wrote: *"Working from home has increased a focus on collaboration and collaboration tools (for work or social purposes) and most of the Microsoft collaboration tools … are not designed to support good records management."*

Third, our survey captured a general desire for more flexible working arrangements, as clearly expressed by these New Zealander and Finnish respondents respectively: *"As technology continues to develop, I can't see NZ government agencies wanting - or having much success in trying - to go back to pre-pandemic 'normal'. In NZ, IM professionals are in demand and the vast majority of us are happier in a hybrid environment - particularly where the workplace is noisy";* "Employees do not want to return to office when they have found out that one can access electronic records also remotely. When working remotely they wanted primarily scanned documents instead of records delivered on paper to the office." *["Työntekijät eivät halua palata toimistolle, kun näkivät, että sähköisiin asiakirjoihin pääsee samalla tavalla kuin toimistolta. Etätöiden vuoksi myös paperiasiakirjat haluttiin tutkittavaksi ensisijaisesti skannattuna kuin paperisena virastolle toimitettuna"].* However, some did not hide a certain skepticism, as we may glean from these Dutch responses: "The knowledge and experience gained and the developments that have been initiated can contribute to a future working environment where there is room for flexibility in time and location of work. However, employers and managers must be able to let go of the control of the 9-5 in the office" *["De opgedane kennis en ervaring en de ontwikkelingen die in gang zijn gezet kunnen bijdragen aan een toekomstige werkomgeving waar ruimte is voor flexibiliteit in tijd en locatie van werken. Echter moeten werkgevers en managers dan wel de controle van het 9-5 op kantoor kunnen loslaten"];* "No impact. We can already see that 'business as usual' has returned. The utopia of 100% working from home that was outlined a year ago has not become a reality" *["Geen impact. We zien nu al dat het 'business as usual' teruggekeerd is. De utopie van 100% thuiswerken die een jaar geleden geschetst werd is geen realiteit geworden"].*

Discussion
As an important and necessary preamble to the discussion of our survey findings, we want to emphasize that the picture of recordkeeping before and during the COVID-19 pandemic that has emerged from our study does not claim to represent the situation in each of the participating countries, or to be generalizable to other countries. Our aim was neither to survey a representative sample of the population nor to obtain results that would be applicable to a broader context. We conducted this research primarily for the purpose of filling a gap we found in the existing literature (including several surveys) concerning the impact of the pandemic on how work is carried out in our Western world. As mentioned in the introduction to this article, the recordkeeping aspects of managing information, people, and organizations are ignored in most published studies. Through our empirical research, despite its limitations, we were able to identify a few patterns that help us reflect on how records management has changed, and how it has remained the same, as a result of the pandemic.

Differences

Before examining the similarities existing among the data collected, we should take a look at the differences characterizing our study participants. The responses in multiple languages included in the previous section should give the reader a sense of the plurality of archival traditions, legal frameworks, and organizational cultures that, among other factors, have been shaping the unique perspectives of respondents coming from different countries (Gilliland, 2017). Although discussing such deep differences is outside the scope of this article, we will briefly highlight again the variety of professional denominations we found among participating individuals. "Records manager" as a job title does not translate well in some cultures, simply because many of the tasks associated with what records managers do in Anglophone countries are carried about by other figures (e.g., archivists, advisors, consultants) or do not exist as such.

Because of the dissimilar ways records-related responsibilities are allocated in different countries, for the respondents whose work duties involved managing older or historical records, working from home meant the impossibility to access physical repositories. Where this was combined with low levels of digitization, an inadequate digital infrastructure, or problems with Internet connectivity, working from home created considerable barriers.

In countries where advanced digitization programs and relevant infrastructures were already in place before the pandemic, the shift to remote working did not cause interruptions or major changes to existing recordkeeping practices, a finding that is in accordance with previous studies (Moser-Plautzand and Schmidthuber, 2023). For some respondents, working remotely was an established routine (mostly part-time), so again, they did not perceive the "lockdown" modality as a dramatic shift – besides the fact that everyone in their household was suddenly working remotely.

Another major contrast that emerged from our study refers to the level of support that people received from their employers when they had to set up workstations at their homes. In some countries, each individual had to acquire the necessary tools, while in others, anything required to work from home was provided by the organization which confirms Papagiannidis et al.'s (2020) study findings.

Similarities

Both benefits and shortcomings of working from home did not appear to differ much among respondents. Many found the "home office" quieter than the "real office" and offered an image of organizations as overcrowded and noisy places, where even information security was perceived by some as being more at risk than at home. Generally, the lack of physical, in-person contacts among co-workers was perceived as a major issue, having both professional (inability to carry out activities that require teamwork) and personal (social isolation) consequences.

Our survey findings suggest that records professionals were generally quite satisfied with their productivity while working remotely, although some connected their higher or equal productivity with working more hours. In any case, overall, our respondents found that their workload before

and during the pandemic had not changed much, and many expressed the wish to continue working partially from home in the future.

We expected to hear from our study participants that records could not be managed through the usual systems or in the usual manner while working remotely, or that the quality of records management, and the kind of control they were able to exercise on the records had decreased because of working remotely. To our surprise, most respondents appeared to think that the pandemic had not significantly altered their approach to managing records. Those who had been using some dedicated software to manage records and information before the pandemic continued to do so during it. The only novelty across all countries was a strong push towards the adoption of cloud-based systems.

The implications of the almost exclusive reliance on cloud-based communication and data storage services for the future of the profession are still unknown. Tools like MS Teams, OneDrive, SharePoint or Zoom were not designed to comply with recordkeeping requirements, and, despite their adoption in lieu of traditional records management systems, their suitability is still to be assessed. As our study showed, in some workplaces, such tools were not (yet) connected to or seen as part of official recordkeeping practices. In future studies, we plan to build on the rich data we collected through this survey (which has only been partially analyzed in this article) in order to develop new scenarios for recordkeeping in a networked age.

The lack of specific guidance from employers, such as formal policies and regulations, guidelines or training on how to manage records remotely was again perceived as an issue by survey respondents who were not used to working mostly digitally. Yet, a common complaint we heard from many, independently of the extent to which their organizations had embraced technology, was that the unregulated, pervasive adoption of cloud-based collaborative systems (primarily MS Teams) as tools for managing organizational records was a problem. Interestingly, the urgent need to fix such problem was mentioned as a top priority by some of our participants: "we are going to be doing a lot of clean up and rationalization of record keeping in the organization", as a Canadian respondent put it for the post-pandemic time.

A perception shared by most study participants was that the pandemic contributed to raise awareness of the importance of good records management within their workplace. This, however, did not necessarily result in becoming more visible as records professionals or achieving a higher standing in the organization. Nevertheless, being valued members of their communities, being put in the condition to fulfil their tasks, and getting enough support from co-workers and supervisors, emerged as common feelings. This positive light cast on the recordkeeping profession was unexpected by our research team. However, as mentioned earlier, it cannot be used to make inferences that go beyond our pool of respondents.

Conclusion
By taking the pulse of the situation in which records professionals operating in different countries found themselves when the pandemic hit, we hope to have contributed to a better understanding of how records management has been impacted by the great shock to all of our

social structures caused by the COVID-19 crisis. Apparently, records professionals adapted quite well to the new situation of working from home – to the point that many would be happy to continue to benefit from flexible work arrangements in the future.

Our study confirms that the pandemic has accelerated the digitization of work processes and resources that was already underway in many Western countries (Moser-Plautz and Schmidthuber, 2023). However, have we seen a substantial transformation in the way information and records are conceived and managed? In other words, has the exceptional circumstance of working from home, fully digital and by means of powerful, cloud-based collaborative tools, spurred records professionals on to imagining new ways of fulfilling their tasks?

While the survey was not set out to examine whether working from home was also used to fundamentally rethink the way recordkeeping is performed, the answers in no way indicated a need or necessity in that direction. This is remarkable, especially in the light of the discussions in both literature and practice about the transformative (and partly even disruptive) impact of technology on society as a whole and the management of data and information in particular. It is worth investigating this further and analyzing to what extent this experience might serve as a catalyst for change in the longer term. In the words of Frank Upward *et al.* (2018), "[m]any archivists, records managers and representatives of other information specializations have opted for end-product paradigms, but managing inscriptions in motion requires a shift in thinking to perduring paradigms" (p. 188). The opportunity to innovate and experiment with a "new paradigm" might have been there, but our findings, and what we anecdotally hear from situations where "business as usual" has been resumed after the pandemic, the recordkeeping function has not been shaken up sufficiently to generate new thinking or new ways of using existing tools.

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