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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Approach
The project is a major endeavour and is utilising an interesting research approach, combining a systematic literature review with a global investigation, a blog and website for ongoing dissemination and an expert advisory panel. The panel of
experts is multi-disciplinary and includes representatives of all four key stakeholder
groups, senior managers, records professionals, IT/systems administrators and
employees (ISO 15489, 2001), in keeping with the philosophy of the project. John
McDonald and Adrian Cunningham, the National Archives of Australia, are members.

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

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

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

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

References
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\(^2\) McDonald, J (1995). Managing records in the modern office: taming the wild
\(^3\) McDonald, J. (2005). The wild frontier ten years on. In: McLeod, J and Hare, CE
\(^4\) Ashby D; Young K. Systematic reviews: What have they got to offer evidence based policy
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AC*erm website www.northumbria.ac.uk/acerm with links to blog (http://acerm.blogspot.com/) and interim results.