Paper clips to computer chips

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There are not too many people who are comfortable with the term 'information age'. Even if you can handle the technology there is a good chance the spectre of 'information overload' and the rapid changes with the technology are unsettling you.

An area that has felt the full brunt of the 'information age' is that of records management and archives. Traditional registry areas in Commonwealth agencies have suffered numerous cutbacks in recent years and have had to survive with less-than-adequate resources, training and support.

All this has happened in an environment where the personal computer has revolutionised the way people do their day-to-day work, how they communicate, and how they exchange information. On top of this, the rapid changes in computer technology mean that the chances of preserving and maintaining access to electronic records over time is a major challenge for a modern archives.

In the early 1970s the Australian Archives began to accumulate a vast array of computer generated formats, the majority of which were created by the oil exploration industry and the records of seismic searches both on-shore and on the continental shelf. By the mid-1980s it was evident that the Australian Archives was losing the battle to provide access to the information held on magnetic tapes.

In 1992 an Electronic Records Project was established to develop policies and strategies for the long-term management of electronic records. The culmination of this work was our presentation of findings at the *Playing for keeps* conference held in Canberra in November 1994. Our approach emphasised the need to focus on whole of government strategies involving a cooperative venture between the Archives and government agencies.

In March 1995 Australian Archives released a short policy statement *Managing electronic records: a shared responsibility* followed by more detailed guidance in *Keeping electronic records* in September 1995. The essential features of this policy are that the best prospect for maintaining electronic records and ensuring their accessibility over time is for such records to remain with the agencies which create or manage them, and that agencies undertake to migrate records as technology changes so that records of enduring value are accessible using the technology of the day.
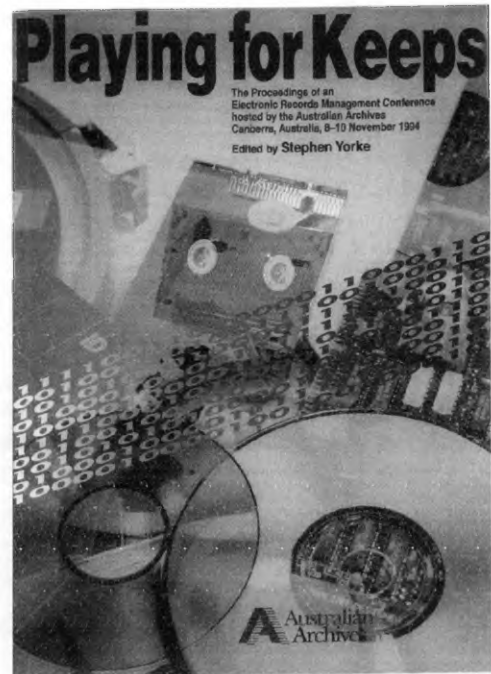
Any electronic records policy has to recognise that paper records will be with us for many years and that modern recordkeeping systems need to manage both paper and electronic records. The Commonwealth is currently evaluating a tender to select a suite of records management computer systems for use by the whole of government that is required to manage all records across all media. The adoption of recordkeeping systems that address the continuum of record needs from creation through to disposal is a major focus of current activities.

The emphasis on the need to have adequate recordkeeping systems can be seen in the recently developed Commonwealth policy *Managing electronic messages as records.* Electronic messages, such as electronic mail, can often be mistakenly viewed as personal communication that is not of concern to the organisation.

Electronic mail systems, however, cannot be isolated from other recordkeeping and records management systems. They are communication devices like the telephone, fax or post, and like them there is the need to document transactions to provide a formal record. Electronic messages required as evidence of business activity should be captured directly into an electronic recordkeeping system.

The business of government requires that records be kept to enable public servants to account for their actions and the use of resources. Increasingly, the business of government is being conducted electronically and, if current trends are any guide, will be almost fully electronic in the foreseeable future.

In this environment it is essential that appropriate records are created and remain accessible for as long as needed, even with the rapid changes in technology. The advantage to the public will be readily accessible records from any location that can support authorised computer access. ∎