Understanding Records Management in the Non-Profit World

Susan Williams
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Kris Bronstad
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Introduction

Non-profit organizations play an important role around the world, providing structures for people to organize themselves for a purpose other than a for-profit business or a governmental agency. Other terms for these organizations include the third sector, civil society, and non-governmental organizations. Non-profits have many different activities and focuses, but are important institutional players in providing needed services, helping people to organize around issues and influencing direction in communities and the country. According to BoardSource, there are 1.6 million non-profits in the United States, employing close to 10 million workers.¹ This includes large institutions like hospitals, foundations and universities, but also many smaller, less resourced groups. A short description of the impact of nonprofits in the U.S. comes from BoardSource,²

The idea of the nonprofit sector may be abstract and poorly understood, but the sector’s role in our society is tangible and easily recognized. Freed from the profit motive that dominates business and from the constraints of government, the nonprofit sector serves as a forum for the creation and dissemination of new ideas, an efficient vehicle for delivering social services, and a guardian of our environment, values, and heritage.

Records management is a field devoted to providing systems for tracking, organizing, locating and disposing of records for organizations past the immediate use of those records. Records management provides an organized track leading to eventual disposal or archival storage of records. Developing a system for records management and archives will help to strengthen the current work and historical record for the non-profit

² Ibid.
sector in the United States. This paper shares key concepts and practical information relating to records management for non-profit organizations.

**Overview of Records Management**

In 1992, Mark Greene wrote (and later updated) the very helpful booklet for non-profits, *An Introduction to Records Scheduling and Management for Non-profit Organizations*, and he leads off with this description of the need³:

**THE PROBLEM—TOO MUCH STUFF**

_The offices of most organizations share an overriding problem: not enough space. Not enough space for people. Not enough space for equipment. But especially, not enough space for the gobs and gobs of records._

Greene describes records management as “the process of determining a useful filing structure, the relative value of the types of files kept by your organization, and a useful (and legally acceptable) method for throwing away or deleting files that are no longer useful.”⁴ Records management merges with archival work, in the eventual decision about whether to keep records in archives for their historical value to others beyond the organization.

Records managers are people who deal with immediate records management and storage for use by the organization. Archivists are people who determine historical value of records and do the work to organize, preserve and create access for these records. Tim Atherton argues that the work of records management and archives is best understood as a


⁴ Ibid, p. 4
continuum and that having the skills and views of both record managers and archivists is helpful for the steps of records management and historical archiving⁵:

The professions of records management and archives, while distinct, surely are working towards the same objective: the effective management of recorded information through all stages of the continuum, from creation to disposal. Effective management of recorded information (what Berner calls “responsible records use and administration”) requires ongoing cooperative interaction between the records manager and the archivist in order to:

- ensure the creation of the right records, containing the right information, in the right format
- organize the records and analyze their content and significance to facilitate their availability;
- make them available promptly to those (administrators and researchers alike) who have a right and a requirement to see them;
- systematically dispose of records that are no longer required; and
- protect and preserve the information for as long as it may be needed (if necessary, forever).

Most non-profits do not have either a records manager or an archivist; however, being able to develop an organized records system can be done by people who are good at organization and attention to detail. It is important to have organizational support to implement a records management plan, since it will require assistance from staff that generate and dispose of records. It is also important that people familiar with an organization can help to determine archival value for records, in partnership with trained archivists. One useful concept for visualizing the usefulness of information over time is the Information Life Cycle. The below graphic from William Saffady’s Records and

information Management: Fundamentals of Professional Practice shows the relative activity for information records over time:

![Graph showing information life cycle](image)

**Organizing a Records Management System**

Steps for developing and maintaining a records management system include:

1. Survey of all records
2. Developing records retention schedule
3. Developing storage and disposal plan
4. Sharing records management system with organization and develop regular transfers

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1. The Survey

The way to get started on a records management system is to find out what records the organization is generating. Greg Hunter\(^7\) in *Developing and Maintaining Practical Archives* notes that doing a records management survey should find active and inactive records, records stored in offices as well as other places, and records that are only needed short-term and those that are historically significant. Hunter lays out useful planning steps for the survey:\(^8\)

- *Who will coordinate the survey? Who will conduct the survey?*
- *How will you gather the information?*
- *What information will you collect?*
- *What will you do with the information gathered?*

It is important to get assistance from employees in different offices who have knowledge of the types of records generated by different parts of the organization.

2. Develop records retention schedule

The survey will help to identify all of the types of records that the organization generates. A next step is to develop a records retention schedule which outlines how long records should be kept.

There are various needs for records – many are internal needs of the organization but there are also legal requirements or best practices for some types of records. A

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\(^8\) Hunter, p. 31-32
detailed resource is *Records Retention and Disposal*\(^9\) created by the Collaborative Electronic Records Project. This resource provides guidance on retention schedules with differing lengths of time, which reflects the fact that different states have different legal requirements.

Beyond the legal requirements, the organization needs to determine how long they may need to keep records for their own uses. This will vary from organization to organization and can be informed by experience, particularly the experiences of staff trying to locate older records for various organizational purposes. Additional guidance is available in a list outlined in *Records Retention and Disposal*, which is reproduced as Appendix A.

### 3. Storage and disposal:

A plan for where records are to be stored and how they will be disposed of is also important. It is not helpful to have information about which records are kept unless they can be found. Having a team of people in an organization to be responsible and very familiar with the records management system and storage plan will help to ensure that records follow an orderly path from creation to destruction or archives. An assessment about long-term historical value should also be made as that helps to determine final disposition, either disposal or movement to an archival setting.

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4. Develop an on-going system

It is important to have a continuous process for records management to work. Staff throughout the organization need to be aware of the guidelines and process so that they can help identify, organize and move records out of their offices and into other storage after the immediate use of the records has passed. And there should be a time every year when records management transfers are made, to keep up the system.

Archival Records

Valuable insight on the history of social change is held in the records of non-profit organizations; these records help flesh out dynamics of communities and organizing in a democratic society. Government, education and business organizations have large volumes of materials in archives. It is important to ensure that social change non-profits also are represented.

Records management programs organize and protect records for the use of the organization. An archival program retains and organizes materials for historical preservation and use. According to Greg Hunter:\(^\text{10}\):

In a typical business, only 1 or 2 percent of the records are worthy of archival preservation. In some government settings, the figure might approach 5%. And in a nonprofit institution very conscious of its history, 8 to 10 percent of the records might reach the archives.

Archival work entails appraisal of records, organizing and preserving them, developing finding aids to provide access, and creating storage in proper climate and temperature conditions with appropriate security to ensure the safety of the records.

This is an undertaking many non-profits may not wish to carry out. It is a good idea to talk with archivists at universities, state or local government, historical societies or archives with related collections to get support, advice and hopefully to find a home for archival records. Appendix A provides a flow chart from that illustrates the many steps in archival processing; it is included to provide a way for non-profits to picture the flow of work that occurs in an archive. In Tennessee, the State Library and Archive (TSLA) staff provides annual workshops, field support and small grants to assist governments, libraries and non-profits to learn about and preserve important records. Information is available at the TSLA web pages for archivists, librarians, historians, and government officials: http://www.tennessee.gov/tsla/aps/index.htm.

Digital Records: A New Challenge

Organizations now have much of their information as digital records, which requires some different systems, based on the same logic for other records – finding what you have, getting it organized and stored properly and keeping the practice up. The primary challenge for digital records is that new software, formats and systems are continually being developed so that digital records, unlike paper, can easily become unattainable. As an example, Highlander Research and Education Center has computer records on 5 inch floppy disks from the late 1980’s to early 1990’s, but neither Highlander nor the primary archival destination for Highlander records, the Wisconsin State Historical Society, has the equipment to be able to read these disks. Audiovisual files have similar challenges. There is no “permanent” solution for digital files, but an orderly way for saving files and a
plan for migration to new formats is required for longer term retention of records. Some useful guidance for digital files is found in the booklet Document Retention and Disposal\textsuperscript{11}: 

**On-line retention period:** usually refers to retaining data on magnetic disks for disaster recovery purposes, generally 1 week to 3 months.

**Near-line retention period:** data may remain on-site but on removable media such as CDs. Depending on the type of information contained, the records may be Category 1, 2, or 3. In the case of Category 1, Records with Enduring Value, the data may need to be migrated periodically to avoid loss of information from deteriorating media.

**Off-line retention period:** data may be stored off-site, typically on magnetic tapes. Like near-line retention, records in Category 1, Records with Enduring Value, should be transferred regularly to more permanent, stable media.

Mark Greene notes that “computer records are much more fragile than paper records, and greater care must be taken to ensure that – for however long they may be needed – they can in fact be used. Three things threaten the “legibility of computer records: obsolete, software, obsolete hardware, deteriorated media.”\textsuperscript{12} And he outlines steps to meet the digital challenge:

\begin{quote}
First, it is important that any files of continuing value be “migrated” from one major software system to another, as the office migrates...Second, files must be backed up, whether off an individual’s hard drive or off the organization’s network, to guard against...
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{12} Greene, p. 16
disasters….And it is crucial to remember that back up media—whether CD’s or external hard drives --- themselves have limited life spans\textsuperscript{13}.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Records management is built on an orderly and well thought out process for dealing with the files that fill up offices. Good resources geared towards non-profits and records management are few and far between. Several excellent resources are identified in this paper that provide valuable guidance to non-profit organizations. Records management is a big challenge. But any group that has been brave enough to take on organizing for civil rights, economic justice, environmental sustainability or many of the other complex issues tackled by non-profits, this work just requires some of the same dedication, attention to detail and persistence.

\textsuperscript{13} Greene, p.17.
Bibliography


Appendix A: Guidelines for Record Retention by Non-Profits, from *Records Retention and Disposition Guidelines*, prepared by the Collaborative Electronic Records Project, page 7-8

**Category 1 – Records with enduring value**

Retain Permanently (Examples, not all inclusive):
- Agendas and meeting minutes
- Appointment calendars of executives
- Correspondence related to official business communications at the executive level to and from others inside and outside the organization
- Distribution list member names and e-mail addresses for each list
- Documentation of departmental and organizational decisions and operations
- E-mail transmittals – messages containing no substantive information that are sent only to provide attachments. Because the legal authenticity of an e-mail requires retention of its metadata (the transmission data), transmittals may supply a key part of the record.
- Grant proposals, approvals, reports
- Policy, program, and procedure directives

**Category 2 – Records with limited value** (Examples, not all inclusive. NOTE: Category 2 does not apply to records documenting essential organization, staffing, and procedures; see Category 1.)

Retain 3 years unless required longer for legal or regulatory purposes
- Budget records
- Day-to-day administration
- Facsimile machine logs
- Office services and equipment requests and receipts
- Supply orders and receipts
- Travel itineraries
- Utilities records

**Category 3 – Records of little or no long-term value** (Examples, not all inclusive)

Retain: 0-30 days or until no longer needed for reference
- Calendars (except for key executives)
- Copies of documents when the holder is not the official record keeper, sender, or primary addressee
- Copies of publications or other published reference materials
- Drafts, except for mission critical documents, program and policy changes, or original creative, artistic, and scientific works
- Informational, e.g. holiday closings, charitable drives, notifications of meetings
- Junk and SPAM mail, whether received via e-mail, fax, or traditional mail
- Messages to/from distribution lists (e.g. ListServs)
- Personal correspondence, e-mail, text messages, etc.
- Routine requests for information or publications and replies
- Scheduling of work assignments, work-related trips and visits
- Suspense files or ‘to-do’ and task lists that serve as a reminder that an action is
required or a reply expected on a given date
Appendix B: Archival Process

This chart gives a good view of the flow of archival work, starting with appraisal and taking the materials into the system (called accessioning).