Electronic Government and Electronic Records:
E-Records Readiness and Capacity Building

An Electronic Discussion

19 November to 12 December 2003

Summary of Actions and Strategies

12 December 2003

Background

This document outlines the range of actions and strategies introduced or proposed by participants in the global electronic discussion *Electronic Government and Electronic Records: E-Records Readiness and Capacity Building.* This document follows on the Summary of Issues document, also prepared for this discussion and outlining the key issues raised by participants during the first week of the discussion.

The discussion, underway from 19 November to 12 December 2003, has been organized by the International Records Management Trust and the World Bank, with funding provided by the Commonwealth Secretariat. At the start of the discussion, nearly 300 people were registered as participants; others continue to join as the discussion proceeds.

The discussion moderators are Laura Millar, an archival and educational consultant, and Andy Lipchak and John McDonald, Canadian consultants with extensive expertise in information and knowledge management, governance, and electronic records management. Andy and John prepared a short background document to help introduce the participants to some of the issues that are relevant to the discussion. This paper is available at the IRMT website at http://www.irmt.org/evidence/wbediscussion.html.

Summary of Issues Raised, Week 1

At the heart of the e-discussion is the search for ways to achieve "e-records readiness" in governments and organizations around the world. As Andy Lipchak and John McDonald noted in their background paper, "e-records readiness is the capacity to create, manage, share and use electronic information (and related technology) to improve governance as well as sustain international trade and innovation; improve global security and support other activities in our increasingly inter-connected and inter-dependent world." Thus it can be argued that a goal of the e-discussion is to seek strategies to help governments and organizations achieve "e-records readiness".

To start the discussion, participants were asked the following question:

If you had to identify three key 'e-records readiness' issues in your country or region, what would they be? In other words, what issues, concerns, or realities are affecting (positively or negatively) the ability of your government or institutions to manage electronic records and the products of information and communications technologies?

The participants offered thoughtful, insightful, and realistic responses to this question, which served as a starting point for a wider discussion of the state of e-records readiness around the world. By the end of the first week, participants had articulated several central issues they felt must be considered as critical to "e-records readiness" and to the ability of governments or institutions to manage electronic records. These issues are listed below.

1. The lack of understanding by public officials at all levels about the purpose and nature of "records" and record keeping, about why they need to exist (decision-making, program/service delivery, accountability, etc.), why they need to be managed, and what their responsibilities are for the management of records through time.

2. The perception – or misperception – that computer technologies will solve all information management problems, and increasing governmental and international focus on information technology without a parallel level of support for records management programs, including the care of both electronic and paper-based records.

3. Despite the perception of the power of information technologies (above), the reality of a "digital divide" in the electronic age and the disparity around the world in levels of access to information technologies, which leads to challenges in managing, preserving, and making available information and records in electronic form.

4. The lack of clarity about how to create/capture, manage, protect, and preserve electronic records and the products of information technologies, coupled with continuous change in technologies and systems.

5. The absence of or weakness in legislation and policies – including formal frameworks for accountability – for the management of information technologies and their products, including electronic records, as well as for paper records.

6. The lack of systems, standards, practices, and guidelines for the management of IT products and electronic records, or the difficulty of obtaining or applying existing standards effectively.

7. The need for effective strategies for records professionals and others to know where to start, who to contact, and how to move forward to deal with the above issues.

Suggestions for Actions and Strategies Raised Weeks 2 and 3

In the second and third weeks of the discussion, participants drew on these specific issues, and raised others, in the search for actions and strategies that could be developed by individuals, institutions, governments, associations, or the wider record keeping community to promote "e-records readiness". Participants offered many specific suggestions for action, which are listed below.

Inevitably, during the search for solutions, the questions or issues also continued to evolve and develop. At the end of the three-week discussion the seven issues above had been reshaped into five distinct "objectives" – that is, actions or requirements necessary to achieve in order to promote the goal of "e-records readiness". These objectives are:

1. To encourage records-oriented approaches, not just IT-oriented strategies, to records and information management issues, including the implementation of standards, practices, and guidelines for the management of IT products and electronic records

2. To accommodate to the complex and changing technical realities of electronic records to ensure their management and preservation.

3. To strengthen legislation, organizational frameworks, and policies to create, manage, protect, and preserve electronic records and the products of information technologies.

4. To develop and maintain training and education initiatives (at both professional and general levels) to ensure success in the management of electronic records

5. To develop strategic initiatives, partnerships, and collaborative approaches to promote "e-records readiness" and raise awareness of and support for records and information management.

It was recognized by the participants that achieving these objectives would require support and involvement not just from records professionals but also from a wide range of key stakeholders: record keepers, information management specialists, information technology managers, senior officials, politicians, and members of society.

The participants offered a wide range of strategies for action, some of which could be undertaken by records professionals, some in concert with other stakeholders. Some actions, inevitably, are outside the direct control of record keepers but are important actions nonetheless.

Along with the strategies, the participants offered a number of "tools", including references to publications, websites, government resources, and so on. These tools have been identified in the resource list prepared for the e-discussion and are available on the IRMT website at http://www.irmt.org/evidence/wbediscussion.html.

Below is a brief description of the various strategies proposed for each of the five objectives.

Objective 1:   Implementing Records-oriented Approaches

Objective: To encourage records-oriented approaches, not just IT-oriented strategies, to records and information management issues, including the implementation of standards, practices, and guidelines for the management of IT products and electronic records.

Strategies: Review existing resources, available in print and electronically (such as those identified in the e-discussion resource list) on the management of electronic records, such as guidelines or manuals on or on the development or restructuring of record keeping systems.

Develop a "toolkit" of core resources (drawing on existing materials whenever possible) to provide guidance in the management of records, including guidelines, manuals, case studies, and related tools.

Establish and maintain quality records systems whenever possible – including in the records or archives office itself – as a way of getting "the house in order" and ensuring that any move to IT is based on sound records practices.

Ensure core paper-based records activities are well managed, including functioning filing and classification systems, regular disposal of obsolete records, regular transfer of semi-current records to appropriate storage, so that sound fundamental operations are in place regardless of the current state of e-records readiness.

When developing any records system, whether electronic or not, ensure that they support critical functional, business, client, and vendor requirements and that they remain valid from a records perspective, not just an IT perspective.

Conduct a "needs analysis" of record keeping, in particular identifying user needs, priorities, and concerns, both for government or institutional users and citizens, the public, and those affected by changes to the management of and access to records and archives.

Ensure any records-related technological application is supported by a document management or records management strategy, so that a records-oriented approach is maintained regardless of the technology used.

Encourage the adoption of audit requirements for record keeping, to ensure electronic records systems comply with business and governance requirements and ensure accountable, high-quality management.

Ensure that vital records are identified and steps are taken to protect them, whether in paper or electronic form, so that regardless of other actions critical operational information is protected.

Develop checklists of requirements for quality record keeping to help determine what actions are needed to improve record keeping capacity, where the organization is in its present development, and what priorities should be considered for next steps.

Identify a ministry or department with which the archival institution can work on a pilot project to develop an e-records management program, including installation of new technologies, development of policies and procedures, and management of existing paper and new electronic records; then expand the pilot program to other departments as possible.

Work to incorporate records activities within the larger information management sphere, particularly in the creation and management of digital information, to ensure that records are managed and used as part of a holistic, coordinated approach to information management and dissemination throughout the organization.

Establish procurement policies that require that calls for tenders for replacement systems address the actions and costs involved with migrating legacy data to the new system or format.

Develop cost/benefit (or risk/benefit) analyses to address the costs, risks, and impacts of managing information and records and making them available, to determine actions and priorities for the management and use of technology.

Develop similar risk/benefit analyses for the potential liability of lost or missing information and records, including not only financial or legal liability but also the losses associated with diminished culture, heritage, and identity by the loss of valuable archival materials.

Conduct regular reviews of programs, including user satisfaction studies, to ensure that operations best suit the goals, objectives, and priorities of the institution, the government, and the region or country.

Objective 2: Seeking Technological Solutions

Objective: To accommodate to the complex and changing technical realities of electronic records to ensure their management and preservation.

Strategies: Support the standardization of media and data formats for the creation, management, and preservation of e-records.

Support the development of open standards (not "proprietary" or commercially owned) for computer software and then encourage the development of an affordable, "simple" self-contained standard technology platform, consisting of hardware and software that are "open" and accessible through the web, along with sustainable power sources and telecommunications networks to ensure wide access.

Work closely with all levels of government to determine best approaches to the media used to create and maintain records, including shifts from paper-based to electronic information systems or to hybrid systems, so that decisions are based with a full understanding of the records issues involved.

Support continued research into the durability and sustainability of new media and formats, in order to address in a planned fashion any decisions to convert data to new formats when (or before) the present formats become obsolete.

Support research into and possible development of a central agency to certify different storage media as of archival quality, or the wider dissemination of research findings by existing institutions around the world.

Encourage continuing studies in information technology issues within an organization so that staff at all levels can continue to upgrade their skills and knowledge and remain current with changing technologies.

Require full documentation from suppliers whenever new systems are installed, along with sufficient training, guidance, and upgrading for staff, so that all users are well oriented on new approaches or methods and become familiar with new technologies and practices.

Recycle used computers and otherwise encourage the installation of computer technologies in schools and public environments to encourage widespread use of, and increasing familiarity with, information technologies.

Encourage school-based technology programs so that children can learn how to use technologies and become technology and e-records literate.

Seek mechanisms for integrating the management and dissemination of records with electronic publishing, so that records may be accessed and stored in a publicly accessible environment while ensuring their preservation over time.

Objective 3: Strengthening Legislative, Organizational, and Policy Frameworks

Objective: To strengthen legislation, organizational frameworks, and policies to create, manage, protect, and preserve electronic records and the products of information technologies.

Strategies: Develop a strategic framework and country plan for the move to e-records readiness (including assessing current records management capacity, developing an argument for action, determining needed improvements, visions and goals, costs and benefits, priorities for action, and resource requirements).

Develop an electronic records archival infrastructure to oversee the management of electronic records, from which would come guidelines and policies for the creation and management of e-records.

Within the government or institution, discuss shared objectives and seek a shared vision that identifies a shared goal, such as better records and data for better programs, services, and governance.

Ensure that any IT policies formulated are in line with social and economic strategies, with records requirements, and with national development plans, so that they best serve the widest needs of the society and are not developed in isolation.

Identify and document the actual and potential risks and negative impacts of poor records management and draw on this information when demonstrating the need for improved infrastructures for records management, particularly in an electronic environment.

Revise existing legislation as necessary to broaden the definition of official records to include electronic records, to allow e-records to be admissible as evidence in a court of law, and to empower the archival institution to set rules and regulations for e-records management.

Examine not only records-related legislation but also allied laws such as access and privacy laws, evidence acts, financial and accounting legislation, and related laws to ensure they reflect best practice in records care, in both a paper and electronic environment.

Establish policies, procedures, standards, and practices that assist records creators to create and retain authentic and reliable records that can be preserved over time, as evidence of actions and transactions.

Establish preservation and access policies and procedures that ensure records and archives remain available and accessible over time to meet the needs of the government and citizens, both in electronic and paper form.

Objective 4: Improving Opportunities for Training and Education

Objective: To develop and maintain training and education initiatives (at both professional and general levels) to ensure success in the management of electronic records.

Strategies: Support the development and delivery of basic training in records and archives management, for both paper and electronic records, but with a strong information technology component to address current and developing e-records issues.

Hold regular regional round tables or work sessions of senior record keepers, to discuss the current status and future development of their programs (possibly building on the work of existing associations such as the regional branches of the ICA?).

Support education and training for public servants in records and archives topics not only in capitals and major cities but also in remote districts of a country, so that they can increase their own knowledge and improve capacity in their region.

Encourage wider attendance at national, regional, and international seminars and conferences, so that more staff gain exposure to the events, and encourage participants to report back to their colleagues on the experience in order to share the information gained.

Encourage donor agencies to support education and training initiatives that "share the experience" as widely as possible and use limited funds to reach as many key personnel as possible.

Support the development of distance education programs, both print-based and computer-based, as appropriate, and support participation by records staff in such programs.

Strive to relate educational initiatives – especially distance-based and self-study courses – to the day-to-day reality of staff, so that they can

bring together theories and principles with practical applications related to their ongoing duties.

Develop liaisons with universities, colleges, public service training institutes, and related educational institutions within the country to consider possibilities for institutional, regional, or national training programs in records and archives management, with an IT component, and work as closely with them as possible to develop relevant and sustainable training programs.

Support the development of flexible learning programs, including part-time study, work place assessments, apprenticeships, and other opportunities that encourage and support wider access to knowledge and skills.

Draw on existing educational resources, such as those available through the Internet, to develop in-house or self-study programs in records and archives management for staff to increase their capacity in key areas or practice.

Encourage basic training and orientation in records and information management for IT specialists, administrators, and senior managers, so that they are more aware of the records issues surrounding information technologies.

Review hiring and promotion requirements and consider ways to link these records-related qualifications, to encourage growth in the institution's capacity and support staff development.

Develop a mentoring program within the organization, with parallel organizations in other regions or countries, or on a wider scale, to share knowledge on an informal, one-to-one, basis, perhaps through email communications.

Consider the potential for awards, honors, and similar recognition for qualify staff performance, particularly in e-records readiness, such as for the completion of training courses or study programs.

Document the actions, approaches, and decisions taken to improve records capacity in the organization – including writing case studies or best practice notes – and share the that information as widely as possible through the organization and through international associations, websites, journals, and other publications.

Objective 5: Developing Strategic Approaches to "E-records Readiness"

Objective: To develop strategic initiatives, partnerships, and collaborative approaches to promote "e-records readiness" and raise awareness of and support for records and information management.

Strategies: When seeking to develop or promote records programs throughout the organization, emphasize the importance of meeting core business objectives, providing client services, and protecting the organization's information assets.

Take every opportunity to demonstrate and share the usefulness of e-records and recorded information, in order to raise awareness of the value of records and archives throughout government and society.

Actively lobby senior officials and politicians to "sensitize" them to the importance of quality records management in an electronic age and the importance of marrying information management and information technology for successful e-government.

Identify champions for the cause of quality record keeping – such as key government officials who believe in the vision and who will help achieve it – and work with them to secure support.

Participate actively in any event, group, or project that affects or can be affected by information management, in order to be "at the table" to help guide policy and directions so that the importance of records and information is recognized.

Seek formal and informal partnerships with information technology colleagues, to understand their perspectives better and help them understand the information and records management issues associated with information technology.

Participate in, and support the development of, regional and global networks, such as this electronic discussion, to share ideas and approaches and to establish a "pressure group" world wide to promote records and information issues world wide.

Participate in, and support the delivery of, additional electronic discussions on various records-related topics, from basic to more advanced levels, to increase knowledge, capacity, and information sharing around the world.

Develop a "critical mass" of records and archives personnel within the government and organization, and then within the region or country, which can serve as a lobby group for change within government and beyond.

Lobby donor agencies – individually or as part of a wider "pressure group" – for adequate funding for education, training, and capacity building in e-records readiness: not only for increased funding but, perhaps more importantly, for more appropriate funding for records-based, not technology-based, approaches to information management.