

DIRKS: Putting ISO 15489 to Work

Any records manager using *ISO 15489* to develop a new program or evaluate an existing one should become familiar with the *DIRKS* implementation process

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International standards are fast becoming a staple of records management programs and practices around the world. These standards make extensive knowledge and expertise available from seasoned records professionals for the benefit of the records management community.

ISO 15489-1 Information and Documentation - Records Management - Part 1: General became the world's records management standard in 2001 and has been accepted as a model by many sectors. In the United States, for example, the National Archives and Records Administration has affirmed the standard. It also has been adopted by the National Archives in the United Kingdom.

There is an implementation document for *ISO 15489: ISO/TR 15489-2 Information and Documentation - Records Management - Part 2: Guidelines*. Any records manager using *ISO 15489* – either in developing a new program or evaluating an existing one – should become familiar with the related implementation process known as *DIRKS* (Developing and Implementing a Recordkeeping System).

Developing *DIRKS*

DIRKS: A Strategic Approach to Managing Business Information, also known as the *DIRKS Manual*, is a methodology developed in Australia for designing records management systems.

The *DIRKS* methodology was developed and tested throughout the 1990s as part of a project undertaken by Australian recordkeeping authorities and professionals to re-conceptualize records and recordkeeping. Other parts of this project included

- The development of the world's first best-practice recordkeeping standard, *AS 4390*, which became the basis for *ISO 15489*
- The defining of records as being primarily concerned with providing key evidence of business activity

- Drafting and implementing new recordkeeping programs and legislation

This project recognized how important quality recordkeeping would be in an increasingly digital world and was an attempt to rebrand and reposition recordkeeping in modern organizations. As Kate Cumming, formerly of the National Archives of Australia (NAA), stated in a presentation, "Records are not a by-product or adjunct to business operations; they are a key evidence of, and information about, business practice. Their appropriate management should be a fundamental business concern."

In 2000, the NAA, in collaboration with the State Records Authority of NSW, produced *DIRKS* as an online manual. It was to be an important part of a program meant to encourage good recordkeeping in federal Australian public-sector agencies. It is clear today, however, that *DIRKS* has value for the private sector as well.

In fact, *DIRKS* has its origins in business systems analysis methodologies that for years have been used in the information management disciplines. By following its step-by-step approach, organizations should be able to recognize and develop business systems to manage evi-

At the Core

This article

- ▶ Discusses the *DIRKS* methodology
- ▶ Identifies the steps involved in using *DIRKS*

dence (records) of business activity. Organizations should also be able to produce a series of key recordkeeping tools, such as:

- A business classification scheme that presents a hierarchical scheme of the organization's functions, the activities carried out to support those functions, and the transactions that occurred while performing those activities. It is, in fact, evidence of those transactions (e.g., letters, e-mails, receipts) that creates records.
- A metadata scheme
- A disposal scheme to enable the systematic disposal of records when it had been determined that they no longer supported the organization's business
- Security and access classification schemes

Perhaps the important thing to note is that if such a comprehensive methodology were implemented and tested effectively across a national jurisdiction, it would likely become a powerful adjunct to the original project of rebranding and repositioning recordkeeping in most organizations.

This methodology for managing business information consists of eight principal steps, as outlined in the *DIRKS Manual* summary. The methodology is flexible and can be commenced at any step, depending on what the records management program needs to achieve. According to *DIRKS*, records managers need to

- Assess the extent to which existing organizational strategies (such as policies, procedures, and practices) satisfy their recordkeeping requirements (Step D)
- Redesign existing strategies or design new strategies to address unmet or poorly satisfied requirements (Steps E & F)

- Implement, maintain, and review these strategies

Getting Started with *DIRKS*

Steps A to C are of most interest to organizations. Before beginning the *DIRKS* implementation, companies should:

- *Prepare a business case to address the needs of the DIRKS program as well as*

- Understand the business, regulatory, and social context in which they operate (Step A)
- Identify their need to create, control, retrieve, and dispose of records (that is, their recordkeeping requirements) through an analysis of their business activities and environmental factors (Steps B & C)

the expected costs and benefits. Implementing the standard cannot be undertaken during the normal, day-to-day operations of a records management business unit, and extra resources will be required. The business case must be thoroughly researched and the resource issues addressed realistically.

- *When approval has been granted, gain the support of the organization's executive or management.* Address the executive meeting or conduct a briefing session for managers and extol the benefits of having an organization that complies with ISO 15489. Describe the DIRKS process and establish what assistance and support is required from managers and staff.
- *Identify key personnel who possess the corporate knowledge and will be able to coherently describe the operational activities and processes.* They will need to be consulted in data collection interviews.

Step A: The Preliminary Investigation

The purpose of Step A is to investigate, document, and understand the essence of the organization (i.e., its structure, its business and operations, the regulatory, social, and political environments within which it operates, and major factors affecting recordkeeping practices). This step is relatively straightforward and involves activities such as researching the agency's website, annual reports, and consultations with managers. The scope of the project may include a variety of internal stakeholders. The following also must be identified:

- *The organization's administrative context, including history and organization structure:* All business areas and boards, authorities, and sub-agencies are ascertained to decide which will be included in the project scope.
- *The relevant legal and regulatory framework(s):* The legislation and

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standards will be analyzed in subsequent steps to establish functions and activities and develop recordkeeping requirements.

- *The business context, including external stakeholders*
- *The corporate culture*
- *Compliance and risk management programs*
- *Recordkeeping practices and technological capabilities*

Step A can be documented on a template or Word document and submitted to management for review and approval. The time period for compiling Step A depends on the size and complexity of the organization, but allowing 1 to 3 months is reasonable.

This preliminary investigation results in defining the project's scope, identifying the regulatory framework, and gaining a comprehensive understanding of the agency being established.

Step B: Business Activity Analysis

Step B is more complex and involves a functional analysis of the organization. The process requires consultation with personnel from the agency's various business units to identify what they do and how they do it. It consists of:

- Collecting information from docu-

mentary sources and consultations

- Analyzing the work performed by the organization
- Identifying each business function, activity, and transaction(s) arising from those activities
- Developing a business classification scheme based on the business functions, activities, and transactions
- Validating the findings with senior management

At the commencement of Step B, an awareness program should be undertaken throughout the organization. Inform personnel (via newsletters, e-mails, and fact sheets) about ISO 15489, the DIRKS process, the recordkeeping tools that will be produced, and how the tools will improve the organization's records management function. Ascertain how the records management program will improve day-to-day work and promote the benefits during the awareness campaign.

The DIRKS project manager must be prepared for data collection interviews. Research should be undertaken on the actions the business area performs, obvious functions and activities identified, and questions prepared regarding issues where further clarification may be needed.

Various methods can be used for

the data collection and consultation process. These vary from one-on-one consultations to workshops attended by 10-20 people from the one business area. Based on the concept that it is easier to react to something on paper, for some projects, draft statements of functions and activities may be created before conducting consultations. For others, the functions and activities will be developed during consultations. The important aspect of this step is personal contact with the stakeholders, explaining the *DIRKS* process and gaining support for it and its future phases.

This is also the time to collect all available documentation issued by the organization (e.g., brochures, business plans, procedures, policies, annual reports, audit reports, newsletters, and fact sheets). An examination of them could reveal business areas or operations that have not been identified and are also focal resources for the functional analysis.

During data collection, consultations/workshops can be offered to give participants an overview of the advantages of using a controlled vocabulary as a tool for classifying records. Executives and management also should be involved in this process, providing input during the consultation process and then reviewing and approving documentation prior to final submission.

After the data collection process comes the functional analysis. The top-down approach to functional analysis is identifying what the organization's broad, overriding role or objective is – for example, to provide public transportation – and then analyzing the data collection sources to determine what the organization does to achieve its role (e.g., provides transportation infrastructure, services, and vehicles; trains transportation staff; and ensures transportation safety). These concepts become the basis for the organization's functions (e.g., infrastructure management, vehicle management, and train-

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Activities are developed by referring to the data collection interviews and examining the flow of business processes to establish what activities encapsulate the major tasks performed to achieve each function. A function may comprise several activities (e.g., acquisition, maintenance, reporting), and an activity could appear under more than one function.

Transactions are the tasks that make up the activity, or the gradual steps that are undertaken during an activity. For example:

Acquisition (activity) transactions:

- Receive request to acquire equipment
- Contact suppliers and request quotes
- Receive quotes
- Determine which supplier offers best value for money
- Notify successful supplier
- Raise purchase order
- Take delivery of equipment
- Check equipment for faults or breakages
- Receive invoice
- Notify finance area to pay invoice

These transactions will help define the scope of activities and also will identify the records that should be cap-

tured to meet the organization's business needs. This information will be required in Step C.

The data collection phase also highlights the skills required to develop the recordkeeping tools. Participants can appreciate the complex functional analysis being performed and will understand how the analysis can be used in other company efforts such as knowledge management and IT.

Getting high-level managers involved increases the profile of recordkeeping in the organization, and managers may be able to identify uses for the functional analysis in other projects. For example, following functional analysis, departments might be restructured along functional lines. It is essential during functional analysis not to base functions on the current structure of the organization because structures change while functions usually remain constant.

Document the Step B process. Maintain a source register showing all documentation collected and detailing all meetings and follow-up communications. Record each business function and activity, and cross reference them to the appropriate source. This provides documentary evidence of the process and justification for the development of functions and activities.

Step B may be the most critical stage in the *DIRKS* methodology.

Developing the business classification scheme sets the framework for all organization-specific recordkeeping products. Completing this step effectively is essential to identifying functions and activities with terms familiar to the organization's staff. This may present a problem, however, if there is no uniformity of keywords and no foundational thesaurus from which to work.

One way to address this issue is beginning the process with an existing thesaurus, such as the *Keyword AAA; Thesaurus of General Terms*. Developed by State Records NSW (formerly the Archives Authority of New South Wales), the *Keyword AAA* identifies terms used in general business functions (e.g., financial management, personnel, and property management) and activities (e.g., policy, procedures, and reporting) common to government agencies. The *Keyword AAA* may also serve as a starting point for non-governmental organizations as well.

Step C: Identification of Recordkeeping Requirements

This stage is relatively easy compared to Step B. Building on the framework developed during Step B, it is now time to identify and document recordkeeping requirements. Supportive factors include: a helpful relationship with the project's participants, Step B interviews, and reading the agency's legislation. These, in fact, may have already provided many recordkeeping requirements.

Transactions documented in Step B will identify the records produced during the activities and these are used to build record classes for each function/activity subset. This is the point at which the organization should develop a draft records disposal scheme and consult project participants for suggested retention periods.

Step C is not an exact science. Unless there are established legal or regulatory requirements for recordkeeping, the organization may be left with a subjective view of project participants. It is important to try to establish how long the records need to be retained within the

organization for business needs by asking a series of questions, such as:

- How often do business areas refer to the records?
- Are the records captured in another recordkeeping system?
- Could the records be required for litigation?
- Can business decisions relating to the function/activity be appealed?
- Are the records of interest to external groups, such as academics, historians, researchers, or genealogists?
- Could the records be regarded as socially significant (e.g., they caused media, public, or political interest; they were controversial; they set precedent; or they resulted in major changes to organizational policy and/or procedures)?

Now it is necessary to document the source, the suggested retention periods,

and justifications for retention periods. Then, finalize the draft disposal scheme and distribute for comment, amendment, and approval.

Defining the Records Manager's Role

A DIRKS-like process is essential to developing a new organization-wide recordkeeping program in both the public and private sectors. Developing tools through DIRKS, however, is not a free ride to good recordkeeping in an organization. The DIRKS process is time-consuming and needs the project manager's full attention to keep the work moving forward. Unless the records manager is proactive, the tools produced can flounder and go unused. The DIRKS process is useful for educating participants in recordkeeping and the tools used, but it is up to the records manager to promote the tools, conduct training and awareness sessions, and audit program compliance. ■

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