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Feet on the Ground, One Step at a Time: Developing an Electronic Records Management Framework for State and Local Government

By Kristopher Stenson, *Illinois State Archives*

Background

The Illinois State Archives has (pardon the pun) a lot of history behind it. Since its establishment in 1922, the archives has overseen the careful preservation of state government records. Additionally, in conjunction with the Illinois State and Local Records Commissions, the archives oversees the retention and disposal of all nonpermanent records held by state and local agencies of government. Illinois has three records commissions: one for state government agencies and two for local units of government, such as cities, counties, townships, and so on. These commissions receive their authority to oversee the management and disposal of government records through the State and Local Records Acts. The procedures for how the commissions oversee the records and what responsibilities units of government have for their records are detailed in the Illinois Administrative Code¹ (the Code). Specific requirements, such as the procedures for creating a records schedule, the process for transfer or disposal of records, and the creation of microfilm, are primarily listed in the Code. The Illinois State Archives acts on behalf of the commissions to oversee these processes. Over time, the archives has created a framework for developing requirements, guidance documents, and general best practices to assist state and local agencies in managing their paper format records. Recently, we have created a similar framework for electronic format records. I will provide an overview of the process for creating this framework and the lessons learned from the experience.

Step One: Create a Committee

In 2012, the archives created a loosely structured, broad-based committee to integrate the widest possible group of stakeholders in the process of developing an electronic records management framework. The committee included representatives from different state agencies, the governor's office, the attorney general's office, and the University of Illinois. The individuals on the committee had diverse backgrounds with expertise in the fields of law, government, information technology, business management, and records management and were particularly helpful when attempting to de-jargon technical guidance or to clarify intent. As we learned time and time again, what

seems obvious to an archivist is rarely part of the common vernacular.

Step Two: Update the Code

Overhauling the Illinois Administrative Code was a critical component of creating an electronic records management framework. This was necessary to update standards, clarify language, and, most important, create entirely new sections dealing with the digitization of records and the management of electronic records in general. Sections of the Code dealing with state rules were tackled in 2012 and 2013 and local rules in 2014 and 2015.

Clarifying Terms. State rules must be clear and understandable to a general government audience. There is always a fine line regarding how much detail can be inserted in the rules before confusion ensues. The revisions included expansion of an existing section of definitions where no substitutes for technical terms such as "metadata," "authentic copy," or "digital surrogate" exist. Definitions were created by reviewing sources from the Society of American Archivists (SAA), the International Association of Records Managers and Administrators (ARMA), and the Association of Image and Information Management (AIIM). We also reviewed guidance from other state archives. Much debate was had over the exact terms to use, but, in the end, we sought maximum applicability over dictionary precision.

Selecting Standards. We also had to decide early on whether the revised rules would reflect one particular set of standards or if they would be an amalgamation of different requirements from varied sources. When dealing with electronic records, this is no small decision as there are costs associated with attaining compliance to different standards. Illinois does not have a centralized IT infrastructure, so a broad range of software environments and IT capabilities had to be considered. This was further compounded when considering local units of government because the rules have to cover everything from small villages to the City of Chicago. Given the huge range of capabilities, we decided to avoid requiring adherence to any particular standard for electronic recordkeeping, focusing instead on a basic set of capabilities that could be accomplished through

different means. This meant acknowledging that, in some cases, agencies might interpret the rules more loosely than intended. At the same time, we felt that making the rules straightforward and approachable would encourage more agency engagement than would an overly complicated and intimidating framework.

Fortunately, we were not starting with a blank slate. There is no shortage of standards, best practices, and general advice related to electronic records management, so the task was to select and adapt the most important requirements from existing frameworks. We boiled down various models into basic functional categories such as “classification,” “security,” and “access.” Each functional category was given a brief statement regarding what a system used to store and manage electronic records should be capable of but not specifically how that would be achieved. For example, the entry for “access” states, “Systems used to store and access electronic records must allow for the retrieval of individual records and their associated metadata in a timely manner.” This statement in and of itself does not allow an agency to implement an access strategy, but it does give a target to aim for. We considered making the rules more specific, but decided more specificity would be a poor replacement for extremely detailed standards already in existence.

Publishing for Public Review. Once drafts of the revised rules were completed, Illinois law required us to embark on a lengthy publication and review process. This meant noting all changes (major and minor) to the existing rules, crafting justification for changes, debating specific language choices with legal counsel and staff from the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules, and lots of waiting. Despite some frustrations, the public review process proved quite helpful, bringing us into contact with additional stakeholders who raised good questions about the rules as proposed. In several cases, perspectives we had not considered were brought to light and allowed us to catch potential problems within the rules before they were finalized.

Lessons Learned

Be Patient. When starting the first changes in 2012, I thought the process would take a few months from start to finish. In reality, each set of revisions took close to a year from initial draft to final approval and adoption. While this was longer than the ideal, the long period of revision and review allowed us to better consider every aspect of the rules. Opinions were often changed when

new perspectives came to light. In more than one case, we had to acknowledge the limits of our own authority. This process has better prepared me to work with other agencies going forward by teaching me to appreciate the daily business needs of electronic records.

Learn from Others. I have found that the archival community values collaboration and sharing more than most, and we should not be afraid to avail ourselves of existing expertise. Greater minds than mine have spent countless hours devising detailed frameworks for every technological issue we face, so why try to create a poor substitute?

Avoid Scope Creep. We learned how important it is to know the core mission and objectives and not to over-expand the scope of the project. It is easy to continually add more detail, more content, more scope, and so on, but, at a certain point, it becomes a burden that undermines the primary intent behind the work. In our case, we needed a framework that established baselines, was broadly applicable, and would be perceived as doable. To set impossible goals would have undermined cooperation from agencies and would have done little to help them.

“Good Enough” Is Fine. At some point, we had to decide that what we had was good enough and continued self-reflection was counterproductive. The result we ended up with isn’t perfect, but it was never intended to be the end-all and be-all. The feedback we have received and continue to receive will help inform future revisions of the framework. The side benefit of continued engagement is that others see the State Archives as a vital, active resource rather than some out-of-date governing body.

Conclusion

Until recently, the archives framework has focused entirely on managing records in physical formats. Over the last several years, the archives has prioritized creating a similar framework for the management and preservation of records in electronic formats. Creating this framework has not been without its challenges and delays, but so far, the response from government agencies has been overwhelmingly positive. The public process of reviewing changes to the Illinois Administrative Code has reaped unexpected dividends. The widespread publication and notification of the changes renewed relationships with many state and local agencies. A mini-PR blitz coincided with the official publication of the new rules with articles, presentations, and many meetings being the result. I am

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encouraged by the feedback thus far, and I look forward to working more closely with state and local agencies when we embark on future improvements to Illinois's electronic records management framework.

Note

1. Illinois Joint Committee on Administrative Rules, "Administrative Code," accessed August 5, 2015, www.ilga.gov/commission/jcar/admincode/044/04404400sections.html.



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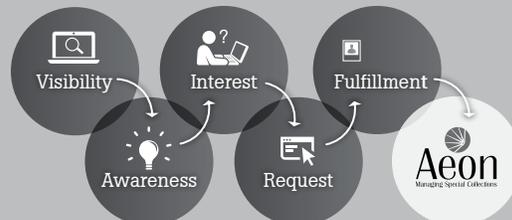
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