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The record's lifecycle - myth, mantra or misnomer?

With a bit of luck the title will have aroused your curiosity enough to read at least the first paragraph of this article. You may be asking yourself 'what does it mean?' or even 'what does it matter?' and those indexers amongst you may be damning me for choosing a title which doesn't give a reader much of a clue as to its subject content. Or does it? Well, it's obviously going to be about the record's lifecycle and, in fact, in the next few pages I'd like to explore the lifecycle concept and try to determine what it really is, whether it's the myth or mantra of the records management profession, or simply a powerful misnomer. Only then can we decide whether it matters or not; after all, Shakespeare's Juliet said "what's in a name, that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet".

What is a lifecycle?

I can't really attempt to answer the question in the title of this piece without first understanding the term lifecycle. My Concise Oxford Dictionary defines lifecycle as a "series of forms of an organism between successive occurrences of a given form". Without an example to illustrate, this isn't particularly helpful and the only example which immediately springs to mind is the amoeba, which seems a far cry from a record, regardless of the record's medium! I thought of an amoeba because I know it changes shape (or form) and every so often must surely re-appear in the same given shape or form. Even so, this doesn't help very much.

What if we split the word up into its component parts, would that help? After all my spell-checker always suggest that *lifecycle* should be *life cycle*, and I always choose to ignore it, though don't ask me why!

The same dictionary affords a dozen definitions of the word *life* but the simplest, and most appropriate for this discussion, is the "period from birth to death, birth to present time or present time to death". Now this is much more straightforward, I can cope with this quite easily. I can visualise life as a continuum, a straight(ish) line joining two points, birth and death, and going in one direction.

Equally, the dictionary's definition of the word *cycle* presents few problems: "recurring series of operations or states". And it's easy to visualise a cycle as a circle, on the circumference of which are several points representing these events, operations or states and, again, a sense of movement in one direction.

Penn⁽¹⁾ actually says that "the life-cycle concept may be easily understood" so, why do I find the concept of a *lifecycle* so difficult to understand or define? I can only suggest that it has something to do with the fact that we're linking an essentially linear concept with a circular one. But this is verging on mathematics and philosophy and, mathematician I once may have been, but philosopher I am not!

The record's lifecycle

This rather unsatisfactory and perhaps naive attempt at defining and understanding the concept of a lifecycle might suggest that no-one would dream of using the word in connection with a record, but not so.

The earliest reference that I've found to the lifecycle concept in relation to records, is that it was first developed within the US National Archives, established in 1934⁽²⁾. Although it isn't clear if the concept was developed in the same year as this Federal Agency was created, it seems reasonable to suggest that the concept has been in use for around 60 years, so it's almost as well established as the profession itself.

However, I sense that it has gained greater prominence more recently, in fact it almost seems to be fashionable. Records managers are now realising that it isn't enough to have efficient inactive and archival records management policies and services, such as efficient storage, retrieval and disposition systems, but that the record creation phase must be managed. Estimates that 75% of the cost of a record are incurred at the creation phase⁽³⁾ have emphasised the critical need to manage this all important early phase of a record's life. I suspect, though I haven't researched the evidence to prove it, that it is this interest in the records creation phase that has led to the popularity of the lifecycle concept amongst records managers.

A 'quick and dirty' search of the last decade of records management literature revealed the use of the term lifecycle by a lot of people, including many prominent names in the field, and in a range of contexts from indexing to registry management, electronic records, records management in local government and in Australia, corporate information management and records creation. Two of the standard texts on records management devote significant space to the concept^(4,5).

However, with very few exceptions, the term is used to describe the stages of a record's life, from creation or distribution through to use and maintenance and finally disposition, a life it seems that has a defined beginning and end, something I would intuitively describe as a *lifetime* rather than a lifecycle. One gets the feeling that the significance of the term *record's lifecycle* is that it includes the creation phase of the record. I did find two articles which seem to be exceptions to this thinking and are worthy of comment.

Barry⁽⁶⁾ recognises the limitations of the lifecycle concept which begins at creation and ends at disposition, in relation to the electronic environment. He notes that "documents ... and more so in a distributed electronic environment than in a paper environment, are very dynamic and recursive in nature. They may exist in more than one stage of the life cycle simultaneously. They may not follow a serial path from creation to disposal but may be re-appraised at disposition time and reappear again in an earlier stage". He uses the word *documents* and not *records* so, depending on whether or not you believe all documents are records you may feel that his statement doesn't invalidate the birth-to-death lifecycle concept. But I don't have time here for a debate about the difference between documents and records.

Independently Sanders⁽⁷⁾ discusses similar ideas and he does use the term records. In fact, he talks about records and non-records. Non-records include duplicates and, presumably, publicly available recorded information but, more importantly they also include what he describes as pre-records or information that hasn't reached the record stage. He suggests that "pre-record information may be viewed as part of the creation stage" and also using a

biological analogy "includes both the conception and pre-natal development of the record". He goes on "unless we believe in reincarnation, we must note that information differs from this biological model in one important respect: the same documentary information may evolve through a multiplicity of pre-record and record stages which are usually called 'revision'".

These two articles are interesting because they add an extra dimension to the lifecycle concept, perhaps the dimension that subconsciously I've felt is often missing. That dimension concerns re-use, transformation and development. In the first article it is highlighted by the notions of *dynamic* and *recursive* records and in the second by the notions of *revised* and *evolutionary* records or information.

My brief review of the literature confirms two things: first the popularity and acceptance of the lifecycle concept and second, that the lifecycle most people are referring to isn't really a cycle but a *life* or *life-time* which has a beginning and an end and is finite. So, where do I go from here?

The message and the medium

Records have both a message, their informational and contextual content, and a medium or multiple media, their physical form. One could easily separate the two and examine the lifecycle concept of each part, would that be useful?

If we consider the medium then, be it paper, an electronic medium or film for instance, it is 'born' and used in the creation of a record, it continues to be used, and is maintained or repaired as the record is used. At disposition it may be carefully protected and preserved, incinerated, shredded or dumped in landfill and, for some media, may in fact be re-cycled. So, its life may be finite or, through re-cycling, may be infinite.

If we consider the message then the information may be totally new, for instance the record of a birth, it may be an amendment to previous information, for instance a revised operating procedure, or it may be new information which is a complex combination of existing concepts, data and information and totally new information as, for instance, in a technical report or strategy document. In other words, the creation process may be simple or very complex and it may or may not involve using or re-cycling existing information contained in records.

The information may be of little long term value and, along with the medium, may be destroyed almost immediately, as in the case of many shop till receipts, it may be archived immediately and rarely used, as in the case of many house deeds, or it may be regularly used, as in the case of a patient's dental record. Like the medium, the information may have a finite or infinite life.

It seems that both the message and the medium may have either a finite *life-time* (i.e. birth to death, along the continuum) or an infinite *lifecycle* (birth to disposition to re-use, around the cycle). So, I suggest, a record may have either a *life-time* or a *lifecycle*.

Putting the loop in the lifecycle

One could argue that this article has simply been about words, in particular about *life-time* and *lifecycle*, and that might be difficult to defend. But, I'd argue it's also been about revisiting a popular concept and raising some questions and issues of interest to the records management discipline.

What is records management all about? What's important to records managers? Are we concentrating too much on storing records efficiently to save space, or disposing of records promptly and efficiently to reduce costs, or storing records because of legal or other obligations, or even trying to control the creation of records to improve their subsequent management and, in doing so, failing to put the loop into the lifecycle i.e. failing to re-cycle or re-use the records and, most importantly, their information content?

In some cases, records managers don't need to concentrate on putting the loop into the lifecycle, records creators do so without their help or encouragement. This is especially true of active records and electronic records, particularly those they have originally created themselves; in the electronic environment it's easy to 'cut and paste' and create new documents and records. But what about inactive records and records created by others? Here records managers do need to think about putting the loop into the lifecycle.

Records management is fundamentally about managing *proprietary* information, the information that is unique to an organisation, the result of its business activities and, in some cases, its product. Whilst many records will be evidence of transactions and decisions other records can be seen as the organisation's intellectual property and should be valued and managed as such but, most importantly I believe, *used*.

Perhaps because of my broader information science background and my experience in information and library services in industry, I often draws parallels between records management, with its focus on *proprietary* information, and library management, with its focus on *published* information. I also consider published and proprietary information to be two sides of the same coin. Ask any librarian or any information user what they are doing with published information and often the answer will be that they're using it to help them to do something and, as a result, create new information. In other words, they're completing the circle and putting the loop into the lifecycle. So, why shouldn't we do this with proprietary information, with records? The answer is we should.

Some businesses are cyclical and information, stored in the form of records, becomes valuable and re-usable, next time around the cycle. Some good ideas fail because of technical limitations but, in the future, when the technical limitations have been resolved, the information can be re-used and the good idea becomes a reality and a success. As far as possible no organisation wants to invest valuable resources in re-inventing the wheel, instead they want their staff to build on previous work, and one way of aiding this is by re-using the information contained in the organisation's records.

Myth, mantra or misnomer?

I'm not sure if I've come full circle or simply gone around in ever decreasing circles in search of an answer to my original question but, I feel I've reached a conclusion.

It seems to me that the term *life-time* is appropriate to some records, what proportion I don't know, but perhaps many transactional records. If we use the rule-of-thumb that 5-10% of an organisation's records ultimately will be archived permanently then, assuming they have been archived because of their value and potential future use, the term *lifecycle* should be appropriate for at least these records. However, I think the term *lifecycle* is appropriate to the many other active, semi-active and inactive records of unknown quantity which are used or recycled to create new records, the evolutionary concept that Sanders⁽⁸⁾ refers to. Perhaps the essence of my discussion is whether a record's life is finite or infinite and so we're back to mathematical concepts.

In my opinion then, the records lifecycle is sometimes a myth, something of a misnomer but must surely be our mantra.

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