

STANDARD ARCHIVES

Paper for the 2004 Congress of the International Council on Archives

Trudy Huskamp Peterson

2004 August 20

As we discuss standards, it is worth remembering how very far we have come in the last fifteen years. But it is also worth seeing how far we can go. One way to examine the whole field is to look at the archival functions and match them with standards. Taking the list of functions generally agreed to be part of the archival horizon, we have, in order of activity:

Records management

Appraisal and scheduling

Accessioning

Arrangement and description

Access review

Reference service

(I have omitted preservation because that is almost entirely a separate professional specialty that archivists may manage but do not perform.) In addition to these major functions, archivists also:

Implement and sometimes develop archival laws

Abide by a professional code of ethics

If we take these together, we see that we have standards for records management, arrangement and description, and ethical practice. We lack professional standards for the functions of appraisal, accessioning, access review, and reference service, and we also lack a standard on the elements of an archival law.

In this presentation I want to look at four questions:

1. What does it take to develop a standard?
2. What are the priorities for standards in the areas of practice where they are lacking?
3. Should such standards be developed through an ICA process or an ISO process?
4. What is to be done?

I. What does it take to develop a standard?

The ISO process has already been described, as has the ICA process. Although they are different, there are some commonalities in the two processes. In both instances, the basic document must be developed by a group of professionals representing a variety of international practices. Then the draft must be submitted to all nations to debate. Revisions then take place, and the revised draft is again submitted to all parts of the professional community for comment, and this process may be repeated if necessary. The final product is then adopted and published.

II. What are the priorities for standards in the areas of practice where they are lacking?

When the Society of American Archivists began developing description standards in the 1980s, the Working Group on Standards for Archival Description developed a set of criteria for evaluating the potential benefits of standards. The criteria are:

1. Cost-effectiveness. Do the benefits of developing, maintaining, and implementing a standard justify the expenditure of resources?
2. Immediacy. Does the decision to adopt or not adopt a particular standard have an immediate capacity to influence events?
3. Usability. Will the ability to access or use records be affected by the decision to adopt or not adopt a standard?
4. Importance. Does the relative importance of the information contained in records warrant the maintenance or adoption of standards?
5. Practicality. Could the standard be applied if adopted?
6. Breadth of applicability. How many different classes of institutions or classes of records does this affect? How often does this apply?
7. Popularity. Does it appeal to the potential users of the standard or will it meet with resistance?
8. Conflict with existing standards. Does it conflict with an existing standard to the extent that it is impossible to implement one without violating the other?
9. Retrospective impact. What will the impact be on the results of existing or prior work?
10. Compliance. Is it likely that parties affected by the standard will comply?

The unspoken element in the SAA criteria is the impact that the adoption of a standard will have on the public: the researchers, the donors, and the “resource allocators” in the organization. A very important reason to adopt a standard is to gain the public’s confidence

that an archives is being managed professionally and well. A standard that does not convince the public or find support in the interested public is not a successful standard.

Keeping this in mind, let us look at the areas of practice and see where standards would bring the most benefit. For each area we will ask:

1. What precisely is the function for which a standard would be developed?
2. Could an international standard be developed?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of having an international standard?

Appraisal and scheduling.

1. What are these functions? Appraisal is making judgments are the length of time records must be preserved, based on the nature of records existing today. Scheduling is the technical process of writing instructions for the duration and handling of future records, incorporating the appraisal judgment.

2. Could an international standard be developed?

Appraisal. The people who developed the ISO records management standard report that they did not include appraisal in the standard because they did not believe they could get international agreement on principles. The current working group appears to be attempting to develop a set of appraisal principles to be incorporated in the revision of ISO 15489. If we distinguish principles from individual judgments, it may be possible to develop a set of standard appraisal principles. It seems unlikely that international consensus could be found on the application of these principles to particular bodies of records. To use a simple example, some governments retain permanently the personnel records of the civilian employees of the government (uniformed military service records are usually handled separately) while others retain them only until all benefits have been paid and then destroy them. The process of making that judgment may be described in a standard fashion, but not the judgment itself.

Scheduling. Technical processes are very compatible with standards.

3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of having an international standard for appraisal and scheduling?

Advantages: An international standard could

- *outline the basic issues that must be taken into consideration in any appraisal judgment

- *provide a schematic presentation of best practices

- *provide a set of logic steps in the appraisal process and in scheduling
- *serve as a tool for archivists to use when negotiating with records-creating bodies

Disadvantages:

- *A standard cannot provide the judgment for the actual decision-making that is the heart of appraisal.

- *Appraisal decisions are normally internal to the organization making the appraisal, such as a government, and the public participation (if not interest) in appraisal is not usual, so adherence to a standard gives no public benefit to an archival institution.

Accessioning.

1. What is this function? Accessioning is a technical process of recording the transfer to archival custody of records. As such it is a part of description and a result of scheduling and appraisal.
2. Could an international standard be developed? Accessioning is a technical process but a crucial one, and like technical processes generally, it is possible to develop a standard.
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of having an international standard for accessioning?

Advantages:

- *Problems in access to records often stem from inadequate accessioning practices. Having an accessioning standard would help to ensure that access issues are addressed at the time of receipt of the records.

- *With electronic records, the accessioning step may be complicated by the question of distributed custody. A standard that addresses this issue could also help archives address the question of the framework for a distributed custody relationship.

Disadvantages:

- *The accessioning function is a very small part of the whole arc of archival custody, and it may not be worth developing a standard for such a limited stage of the archival cycle.

Access review.

1. What is this function? Access review is the process of analyzing the contents of the records and comparing the contents to the laws, regulations, or provisions of the deed of gift applicable to the materials.

2. Could an international standard be developed? The work of the European Union on developing a standard for access to archives in the Union makes it clear that it is possible to come to some fundamental understandings of the standards for access. In addition, the ICA and the CITRA have both adopted as “guidance” the position on access to archives developed by the Council of Europe, giving a standards development group a base from which to work. The difficulty, once again, is that the application of the access standards is the critical part of the process, and this is individual judgment in very disparate institutional settings.

3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of having an international standard for access?

Advantages: An international standard on the principles of access could:

- *outline the basic issues that must be taken into consideration in any access judgment

- *serve as a tool for archivists to use when negotiating with records-creating bodies, with donors of personal papers, and with in-house legal staffs

- *provide a benchmark for public researchers, who are intensely interested in the possibility of access to records

- *bring public approval for archives

Disadvantages:

- *The critical part of access is judgment, and that cannot be standardized.

- *National practices vary greatly, and only very general standards can apply to archives internationally.

Reference service.

1. What is this function? Reference service is the process of providing information about the institution and its holdings, providing information from the records, providing the records themselves, and loaning records or copies thereof.

2. Could an international standard be developed? Yes, reference service is a set of technical processes that apply without regard to the specific information requested. Like most technical matters, it is amenable to standards.

3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of having an international standard for reference service?

Advantages:

*Reference service is the area in which the public is most concerned with archival practice. Standards will help the public trust that the profession is policing its own house.

*Research is increasingly international, both through the use of the internet (websites, email requests) and through travel to archives. Standardizing what practices the researcher will encounter will have important benefits of public acceptance and efficiency of operation.

Disadvantages:

*Reference is one of the most fundamental functions, and adapting to an international standard may require internal adjustments that will encounter staff resistance.

Archival laws.

1. Could an international standard be developed? The ICA legal matters committee has gone a very long way toward developing a standard, first in the mid-1990s and now in 2004 with a revision. The only thing that would be required would begin the process of circulating and debating the draft.
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of having an international standard for an archival law?

Advantages: The development and modification of an archival law is a complex task. Many archivists have no legal background and are faced with educating lawyers who have no archival background. A standard for the elements of a basic law will provide archivists who must develop or modify a law with a tool to share with the lawyers involved. Further, it will give the drafters a checklist to help ensure that all elements of archival practice are covered by the proposed legislation.

Disadvantages: The disadvantages are few. Any law must be adapted to the ethos of the polity where it is legislated, and one standard will not necessarily fit every political system, particularly at levels of government lower than the national level.

From this brief survey, it is clear that the benefits of standards are most significant in the area of reference and access. The standard that is nearest to development is that for the elements of an archival law.

III. Should such standards be developed through an ICA process or an ISO process?

I believe that any archival standard should be developed through an ICA process not an ISO process, for two important reasons:

First, ISO standards are voted upon on behalf of a country by its national standards body. That body may or may not ever consult an archives before casting its vote on a standard of vital importance to the archives. If the national standards body does consult an archives, it almost surely will only be the national archives, excluding the professional organizations, other types of archives, and individual professionals. ICA standards, on the other hand, are vetted by all category A and B members, with all other ICA members invited to send comments. This process gives a much broader review of the standard, with the twin result that the standard is more likely to reflect a consensus of practice and that it is more likely to be accepted in practice.

Second, ISO standards are copyrighted, and every copy must be paid for. That makes it difficult to teach an ISO standard, for example, because each student would be required to pay for it. Similarly, the pricing of ISO standards makes it difficult for some archives to purchase a copy, and it encourages the unauthorized copying of the standard. ICA standards, on the other hand, are free to the membership and can be used in classrooms and distributed freely. This is an immense professional benefit to all archives.

IV. What is to be done?

ICA should

1. Establish a working group to develop an ICA standard for reference service
2. Establish a working group to develop an ICA standard for principles of access
3. Submit the CLM's draft "Elements of an archival law" to all Category A and B members for comment. Assuming the comments are positive, the Executive should formally adopt the "Elements" as a standard comparable to the Code of Ethics.
4. Establish a mechanism to manage all ICA standards, including assuring periodic revision.

Standards are a floor for archival practice. They provide us with a set of best practices and guidelines. They harmonize practice in an increasingly inter-connected world. They provide

the public with a consistent professional practice. They are tools only—they are voluntary—but they are powerful support for every archives and archivist.