PLANNING FOR THE ARCHIVES OF THE FUTURE

What are our government archives doing to ensure we have the flexibility needed to keep up with technological changes? Public Record Office Victoria explains how a revised Archival Control Model will prepare their Archival Management System for the records of the future.

By **Natasha Cantwell**

As records and information management professionals, our roles and the records we manage are in a constant state of flux. Our processes and practices are constantly evolving to meet the challenges of new ways of record-capture - from the paper files of old, to present-day emails, databases and social media tools designed to delete information after 24 hours.

Over the next two years, Public Record Office Victoria (PROV), the archive of the State Government, will launch its long-awaited new Archival Management System and Digital Archive. The new systems will be more accessible and efficient, with the new Digital Archive able to ingest many thousands of records a day. This is a huge improvement on the current limit of several hundred, thereby reducing the overall time frame for completion of large digital transfers. For the general researcher, the biggest improvement will be how easy it is to view and download digitised records directly from the search results page. However, as RIM professionals know, there's a lot more going on behind the scenes than can be seen. Underpinning these brand new PROV systems will be a revised Archival Control Model (ACM) that provides the conceptual framework for the project. Here, a snapshot of why it was developed and how it will impact the accessibility of PROV's collection.

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WHY REVISE THE ACM?

As the first state archive in Australia to have a digital archive, PROV has been responding to the challenge of archiving records from digital systems for more than 10 years. Working within the limitations of PROV's existing ACM, it became evident that many current records don't conform to the model's rigidly defined structure. PROV's current model reflects the traditional paper-based filing systems of the 20th century. Increasingly, staff have found themselves struggling to accurately represent some types of complex digital records and information systems, and either force-fit records into structures or create artificial structures. For example, there is no option but to use the 'series' entity to describe every digital system dealt with, whereas records such as databases would be better described as a 'system' rather than a 'series.'

Current metadata fields also suffer from a lack of flexibility. There is limited capability to store and make available to researchers the detailed record descriptions that are often maintained by government agencies in relation to both digital and physical records. Properties aren't able to be added to or modified so there is potential for metadata to be left out, or shoe-horned into the existing metadata schema, thereby losing contextual meaning. Having to constantly work around the system compromises the ability for the records to be easily discovered and interpreted by users. The ACM needed to evolve to enable a more malleable response to technological changes.

For example, the land selection files in PROV's collection include a large amount of metadata, such as the name of the lessee or grantee, the parish in which the allotment is situated, allotment number, area of block, date lease commenced, and date of grant. If the system only provides one box for 'date', it becomes difficult to accurately record both the date the lease commenced and the date of the grant. PROV aims to be able to capture all of this data for each record, and importantly, preserve semantic meaning so that records become more 'self-describing'.

THE WAY FORWARD

A commissioned report from Barbara Reed of Recordkeeping Innovation provided PROV with a set of recommendations, which an internal working group workshopped over a 12-month period. Working in previously unexplored territory, this group was given the freedom to experiment and to not only come up with new concepts but to put these theories into practice. As no one knows exactly what the future will hold, the key requirement for the revised ACM is flexibility.

The new model is designed to be extendable and to allow for broader possibilities for the description of archival entities and their relationships. For example, future record keepers might require 'mechanism' as a record creating entity, alongside 'agency' and 'person', to recognise the possibility of machines autonomously creating records (for example red light cameras). PROV envisions being able to add new relationships and entities with minimal coding required to the Archival Management System and without invalidating the conceptual basis of the model or diminishing the value of

or 'ports'. Unnecessary detail will be removed so users will experience a more streamlined search. With the exception of legacy records, they'll no longer have to navigate through 'consignments' (records transferred to PROV in a group from an agency) and 'units' (storage containers). With these removed from public view, researchers can browse directly from a 'series' to a 'record'.

Furthermore, the model is designed to take advantage of the wealth of knowledge in PROV's wider community. Researchers will have the opportunity to enhance the descriptions of records, for example, transcribing handwritten letters, or adding keywords to historic photographs.

Having a comprehensive Archival Control Model is essential for any Archival Management System. Whatever the records of the future may be, with this new model, PROV is ready for them. For information about other PROV government recordkeeping projects currently underway, visit: https://www.prov.vic.gov.au/recordkeeping-government/research-projects ❖

existing data.

Compatibility is also important. The model is an extension of the previous ACM and is designed for gradual uptake while remaining backwards compatible with records described under the previous model. Like the existing model, it is compatible with the Australian Series System and remains grounded in Australian archival practice. It conforms with the AS/NZS 5478 Recordkeeping Metadata Property Reference Set, so PROV will be able to easily share and exchange metadata with other organisations. It is also understood to be one of the first in the world to align with the draft Records in Contexts (RiC) Standard issued by the International Council on Archives in 2016.

Arguably, one of the most important considerations for an archive is how to enhance discoverability and create easy access to the digital records from the collection, including photographs and documents. PROV's revised ACM will support users to locate records, whether they're 'skimmers' (those who may only want to access one or two records to meet their information needs), 'swimmers' (those who traverse across the collection to find multiple but reasonably closely related records), or 'divers' (those who want to dive deep into our collection for discovery – follow pathways, relationships and links to find undiscovered treasure). Because the model describes records and their context, researchers will be able to identify readily who created the records (the provenance) and discover, other records with a shared provenance or are related to the same function to support their line of historical enquiry. Following these 'clues' can reveal a rich vein of historical evidence waiting for discovery and interpretation.
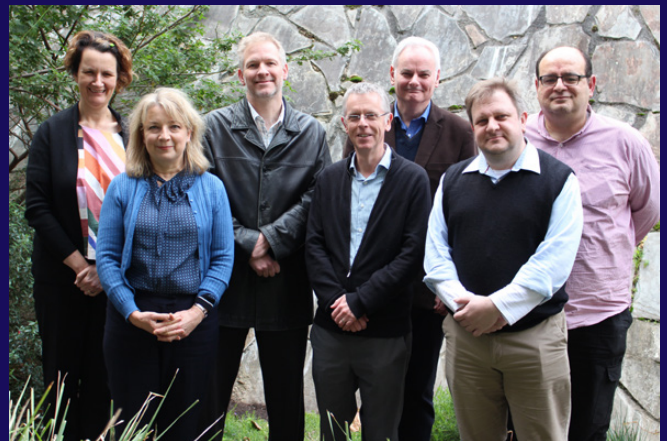
ACCESSIBILITY IS ADDRESSED IN MULTIPLE WAYS

With the revised ACM the format of the records is immaterial as records are described as conceptual entities. Access copies (eg digitised records) can be viewed seamlessly via the original citation rather than via a separate description. Each record within a series has a unique identifier, this unique identifier could be a date, number, or an alpha identifier. It is the combination of the VPRS number and the records' identifier that provides the truly unique identifier for every record in the PROV collection.

The model will also provide users with more direct pathways to records by removing strict hierarchical structures and connecting entities. For example, over time, record series will be directly related to 'functions' like 'public health'

The team behind PROV's Revised Archival Control Model: Emma Fowler, Julie McCormack, Jack Martin, David Fowler, Peter Francis, Daniel Wilksch, Charlie Farrugia.
Absent: Andrew Waugh, Owen O'Neill, Nick Fahey, Darren Byrne.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Natasha Cantwell is a Communications and Online Engagement Officer at Public Record Office Victoria. She has a background in media, spanning journalism, advertising and technical writing, and a Post Graduate Diploma in Art and Design from Auckland University of Technology. Natasha's interest in history lead her to join PROV in 2016, where she works on special projects such as producing the Sir Rupert Hamer Records Management Awards and coordinating internal communications for the Digital Archive Program. She also shares PROV's fascinating collection through #WordOnTheStreetVictoria.
✉ Natasha can be contacted at natasha.cantwell@prov.vic.gov.au

Contributions by Julie McCormack, Manager, Appraisal and Documentation and David Fowler, Digital Transfer and Documentation Coordinator, Public Record Office Victoria.