

New York State Archives and Records Administration (SARA) Electronic Records Program Status Report

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This essay discusses the development of programs and strategies for management and preservation of electronic records in the New York State Archives and Records Administration (SARA), focusing on the State Government Records Division. SARA's approaches to electronic records have been evolving for more than a decade in response to constantly changing technology, reorganization of the State records management program, and new methods and techniques for electronic records management. Progress has occurred within the context of a relatively static policy environment which assigns most responsibilities for information system development and information management to individual State agencies. In addition to the programs discussed here, SARA established an Information Technology Unit to provide guidance and assistance to local governments in 1992.

Origins of the Program:

The New York State Archives and Records Administration (SARA) has been involved with electronic records for more than a decade. State Archives staff began investigating the implications of "machine-readable" records during the late 1970s, and an assessment report issued in 1984 on the conditions of historical records and archives in New York raised concerns about electronic records. Since 1985, SARA has been actively engaged in electronic records program development when an expert on electronic records was recruited to direct the Special Media Records Project.

The Special Media Records Project (1985-1987) used traditional archival methods to inventory machine-readable records in 19 of 76 State agencies, issued a preliminary report on the results, and conducted five extensive appraisals of potentially archival records. The Project was co-sponsored by the Governor's Office of Management and Productivity (MAP), a small unit in the Executive Chamber which conducted other economy and efficiency initiatives, including a paperwork reduction/forms management project and a study of the placement of the State's records management program. In 1988, SARA produced the *Strategic Plan for Management and Preservation of Electronic Records in New York State Government* based on research from the Special Media Records Project.

Timing of the Special Media Project and the context in which the Strategic Plan was written turned out to be critical. When the project started, the state records management program was in the Office of General Services. The State Archives had advocated consolidation of records management and archival programs in order to expand records management services and exert control over records at an earlier point in their life cycle. In

1987, responsibility for records management was transferred to the State Archives, which became SARA, following a study and recommendations by MAP. Development of the Strategic Plan coincided with expansion and reorganization of the State Records Division into three bureaus: Records Analysis and Disposition which was responsible for inventory, analysis, scheduling, and appraisal; Archival Services which carried out accessioning, description, preservation, and reference services; and Agency Services which operated the State Records Center and was to develop programs for education, training, and technical assistance.

The Strategic Plan proposed an "integrated" approach to electronic records management and preservation. Objectives and activities were assigned to each of the three bureaus. Rather than devote specialized staff or other resources to electronic records, the Plan proposed that electronic records work be integrated into all functions. The Plan also envisioned development of a comprehensive information policy and a coordinated set of information management practices for State government which could establish a more significant role for SARA in such areas as systems design requirements and open systems standards. By mid-1990 it was apparent that the integrated approach proposed in the Strategic Plan was not fostering development of SARA's electronic records program. Insufficient resources were devoted to electronic records activities and there was no central direction for program development activities.

In September 1990, SARA established the Center for Electronic Records (CER) in the Bureau of Records Analysis and Disposition, staffed initially by one full-time Associate Archivist. Currently, three archivists and two public records analysts work in the CER. There is one vacant position for an analyst/technical support person to handle accessioning. Two of the six positions are funded by a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) to carry out the "Building Partnerships" project. Staff in the CER work on overall program development, development of guidelines, special projects, accessioning, and difficult appraisal and analysis assignments.

Since the Strategic Plan was issued, the State Government Records Division completed several major initiatives that now support a basic archival program for electronic records with the capacity to identify, accession, preserve, and provide user access to electronic records in simple formats, such as numeric data files and ASCII text files. Staff in SARA's Appraisal and Analysis Unit, who do not specialize in electronic records, have developed the ability to review disposition schedules and appraise records from common automated systems. A recently completed general schedule for records in Electronic Data Processing units provides guidelines to all State agencies for creation and maintenance of records that document centralized EDP functions. The State Records Center has expanded and improved its storage services for back-up computer tapes.

Several other initiatives have moved the program beyond basic records management and archival services, by increasing awareness of electronic records issues in State government, providing guidelines and regulations that address electronic records management, and testing new approaches to continuing access. In 1992, SARA issued new regulations for State

government archives and records management which include special provisions for electronic records. SARA also published booklets on Optical Disk, Automated Office Systems, and OCR, and staff are developing guidelines and publications on the definition of a record and on legal acceptance of records. In March 1993, staff presented a one-day workshop for records managers, program managers, and EDP professionals on electronic records management. We worked closely with the New York State Forum for Information Resource Management to complete the "Sourcebook Project" which examined the use of metadata to promote access and sharing of State government information. Building on the Sourcebook Project, SARA developed (with the State Library) a proposal for an Information Locator System, a prototype of which will be developed later in 1993 and 1994.

New Directions:

In 1992 SARA launched a major program development project that may establish new directions for electronic records management in New York. The "Building Partnerships" Project is funded for two years by a grant from the NHPRC. After several years of experimentation with applying traditional techniques (e.g. inventory, scheduling, appraisal, accessioning and in-house, custody-based preservation) to the administration of electronic records, staff in the Center for Electronic Records wished to explore alternative approaches. This reexamination was also motivated by the failure to develop a statewide information policy or establish a single administrative body with authority over all aspects of information management in New York. In this context, each individual agency is the locus of information management activities, using widely varying policies and methods.

Through the project, we are defining requirements for electronic records management programs, gathering and analyzing baseline data on policies and methods used by agencies to manage electronic records, and identifying model or exemplary approaches that have been implemented in State agencies. The project will examine incentives for and barriers to better management of electronic records by studying the measures that agencies already take to manage their automated systems and determining how existing agency approaches can be modified, utilized, or expanded to meet record keeping requirements and archival needs. The underlying assumption of this approach is that effective strategies for electronic records management and archival programs must be closely integrated with agency programs and practices and must utilize practical and effective tools that can be built into automated systems.

Critical Success Factors:

Although our electronic records program is not as successful as we would like, the program has grown despite fiscal constraints and cut-backs in some parts of the program. Some of the critical success factors include:

- A high level of support for electronic records program development from SARA top management.

- Keeping electronic records work as a priority even when some traditional archival activities had to be curtailed.
- Careful planning combined with a willingness to reassess approaches and abandon strategies that were not successful.
- An ability to recruit and retain highly qualified and motivated staff who are willing to continue to try new approaches and develop new skills.
- Frequent enriching dialogues and exchanges with colleagues in other institutions who are grappling with electronic records problems.
- Persistence over an extended period of time. SARA has been working on electronic records program development for more than a decade.
- Increasing interest and pressure from our direct customers (State agency program managers, oversight agencies, data processing professionals, and users of electronic records) who are concerned about adequate documentation and continuing access to electronic records.

Obstacles to Success:

- Lack of progress toward a comprehensive information policy and a coordinated set of information management practices for State government. General lack of influence at the policy level.
- Lack of visibility at the senior management and policy-making levels of the Executive and legislative branches.
- Gaining the visibility and credibility to become involved in design of systems.
- Overcoming the widespread perception, at least within government, that SARA is concerned primarily with traditional paper records.
- Competing priorities between "traditional" or "core" records management and archival activities and electronic records work, and between analysis of current systems versus involvement with system design and redesign.
- Absence of concrete, practical and effective tools and techniques to support life cycle management and continuing access to electronic records.
- Integration versus specialization in both programs and methodologies.
- Understanding, adapting to and contributing relevant services to researchers in the networked information environment, especially with regard to access to records. This will require increased coordination and cooperation with other information professionals.
- Keeping up with changing technology. We need to keep informed about new information technologies to ensure that our approaches are relevant and can be implemented with current technologies, and to make sure that we use technologies to their maximum advantage in addressing electronic records problems.

Conclusion:

The results of the "Building Partnerships" project will force a critical reassessment of our electronic records program. Baseline data from the project already illustrates some of the conceptual and methodological flaws that result when applying traditional methods, designed with paper records in mind, to the electronic environment. A survey of agency policies and practices is unearthing countless effective approaches to specific electronic records problems, although no comprehensive solution exists. An unanticipated result of the survey is the extensive interest among agencies in the results. The Center for Electronic Records has become a repository of information about the "best practices" for a wide range of information management problems. In a constantly changing environment, we will be satisfied with a collection of best practices because the ultimate solution to electronic records management remains an elusive goal.