

January 1985

Continuing Education and Information Management: Or, the Monk's Dilemma

Frederick J. Stielow
University of Maryland

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stielow, Frederick J., "Continuing Education and Information Management: Or, the Monk's Dilemma," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 3 no. 1 (1985).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol3/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

CONTINUING EDUCATION AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT: OR, THE MONK'S DILEMMA

Frederick J. Stielow

The biases in the preparation of archivists in this work are much the same as Lawrence McCrank in his "Prospects for Integrating Historical and Information Studies." Like McCrank, this paper assumes the proper direction for archivy¹ is a synthesis between library and historical training. But today that juncture is no longer sufficient, for the techniques of information management must also be added to the mixture. Only at such a nexus can a distinct profession and professional studies in the fullest definitions of those terms emerge. With the onset of the computer age, archivists can simply no longer ignore the methodologies of information management and adequately collect and preserve documentary heritage. The danger for archivists is that they will be bypassed by technology and relegated to antiquarian status--the medieval monks of a post-industrial society.²

Archivy clearly needs to address the theoretical implications of data processing and also the proper direction for archival educational efforts in this rapidly developing area. Moreover, according to a 1983 survey,³ archival educators now acknowledge records management as an essential foundation course. Unfortunately, archivists still appear the worst educated of all information specialists in these regards. The reasons behind this tendency range from the general and the recency of the microchip revolution, a misunderstanding of computer applications, and a measure of traditional bureaucratic inertia and budget restraints, to the more specifically archival problems of the absence of

preappointment educational standards and an uncertain professional identity. In addition, archivists should also recognize the existence of what others perceive as defensively elitist and, what may be seen in regard to librarianship, as sexist attitudes. The roots of these prejudices can be traced at least to Samuel Flagg Bemis's famed 1939 report on archival training, for as Richard Berner has suggested:

If many archivists have not been infatuated with the elitism of the Bemis report--that archivists should consider themselves scholars primarily--they would have dealt more directly with archival problems and helped to bring the profession along faster in its development. The report carried with it an unwarranted contempt for librarians and librarianship, and it came unfortunately at a time when the opportunity⁴ for fruitful collaboration was most promising.

The same elitism, which has retarded the development of archives in the past, continues to raise its reactionary head in regard to information management. Furthermore, such attitudes have already provided a residue of ill will among our natural allies in the information field. As Jake Knoppers charges in an article in the ARMA Quarterly on integrating such disciplines:

Finally, archivists, always being a breed apart, are quietly plotting their moves of how to sight their two big guns, namely, their black box of "archival appraisal" and the cry of "corporate memory" on the whole squabbling crowd so that at the appropriate moment they can fire the blast that will ensure them a place and role in the "electronic age"...(Archivists) take a combative attitude towards "fellow information specialists" either by downgrading the other or by claiming new or expanded territory (read, in order to obtain status, staff, and funding).⁵

While it is doubtful that archivists could ever plot together, Knoppers does raise some interesting points. He also brings up some of the relatively

successful efforts of professional associations other than the Society of American Archivists (SAA) to effect minimum standards and accredit their continuing education offerings: such as those by the Associate Information Managers, and a range of alphabetic associations including ALA, ARMA, AASLH, DEMA, and SLA.⁶ The latter, for instance, advertised twenty continuing education courses for information specialists, plus advanced work in "Materials and Machines," at their last convention. By implication, if the archival profession does not act, it will be eclipsed by its sisters.

Before proceeding to suggested remedies, a number of underlying issues and misconceptions must be broached. Although shocking to some of the more traditionally trained historian/archivists, the field should note that historical research has itself altered to incorporate computer-addressable information; hence, archivists should logically respond by collecting such data, if they are to pretend to meet research purposes.

In terms of information control, one must also begin to understand that the manual techniques of records management--the techniques of ordering information basically as a commodity--do offer significant benefits for the archives. Remember that archivists bear a primary responsibility for launching records management through their efforts to extend rational controls over the life cycle of federal records during the post-World War II era. But now the records managers may be leading, while the archivists sit dutifully at the end of a conveyor belt awaiting deposits. Although seemingly mundane, the yearly avalanche of more than seventy-two billion new documents might lead archivists to see the wisdom of retention schedules and the *mélange* of correspondence, directives, files, mail, reports, and vital records management, as well as such important skills as forms design and microfilm control. Such techniques are economical, better suited for large collections, and essential for machine-readable records. Moreover, archivists should start actively

to investigate the application of some of the more advanced methods from operations research (OR)--like queuing theory.

If they can accept some of the benefits for a manual approach in processing and analysis, archivists must acknowledge that these escalate for an automated system; moreover, they should seize on the secondary and tertiary benefits of the computer for in-house management and later for researchers. Even before adoption, however, archivists need to come to grips with some basic facts: for example, that an automated system must rest on a well-designed manual one. Understand too that a current need is to demystify the computer and "computerese"--in fact, to realize that automated processes are by definition reductionist and less complicated than human thought. Archivists must come to grips with the technology as a tool to augment their services, but also begin selectively to adapt and redefine that tool to their purposes. They must accept the onset of a new age, when many of the entering personnel already have and can be expected to continue to have a higher level of technical expertise in this area than long-term practitioners. Finally, and most importantly for continuing education, this will be a time in which the constant emergence of newer technologies demands recurrent re-education. As John Naisbitt indicates in the best-selling Megatrends :

In education we are moving from the short-term considerations of completing our training at the end of high school or college to lifelong education and retraining. The whole idea of what education ⁷is will be conceptualized during the next decade.

In the context of information management, what does the world of archivy need? Above all, it must have clear expectations as to the appointment education necessary to become an archivist, standards that must now extend to training in records management. Assuming a basic knowledge of manual systems, the problems for continuing education can then center on automation. At this juncture, one of

the pressing considerations is to assure administrative training to aid in the introduction and assimilation of automated systems into repositories. An answer here may lie in middle management institutes--either as a function of the proposed SAA archival institute or a by-product of one of the established educational programs.

But by ignoring general administrative applications and concentrating on specifically archival matters, the discussion perforce turns to a traditional concentration on processing and retrieval efforts. Such concerns can be divided into two somewhat overlapping areas: on one hand, efforts to create national standards of bibliographic description for the exchange of information through the online utilities; and, on the other, constructs to aid in-house processing.

The basic battleground for national standards has been between Selective Permutation Indexing (SPINDEX) and Machine-Readable Catalog (MARC) formats. If archivists accept the implicit findings of the National Information Standards Task Force (NISTF) and the general trends in the field, then MARC appears destined to triumph. But MARC implies library cataloging and not "reinventing the wheel," which should lead toward preappointment training out of the library schools. Such training can also introduce the benefits of more highly developed searching strategies in the emerging bibliographic data bases--like Dialog. Without such training, archivy will have to rely on the networks for initial indoctrination or go to the expense of establishing specific workshops.

Perhaps a more important focus for archival energies should be on the automation of in-house procedures. For the microchip revolution, with the increasing affordability of ever more powerful machines, now demands attention. In contrast to the hesitancy engendered by earlier and exceedingly expensive mainframes, even the smallest archives can and should investigate computing, but again with some preliminary understandings. Though important, too

much emphasis can be easily placed on the machinery itself, rather than on an understanding of the applications of the tool for archives. Archival attention should be focused more on software and the theoretical implications of data processing than on any hardware evaluation. In addition, while introductory sessions in both areas are still necessary, sufficient expertise also exists to elevate sights immediately toward that which is truly archival. Some efforts along these lines can be seen at SAA meetings, such as those on indexing and thesaurus control and the management of machine-readable records. Others should be offered on the evaluation of any specific forms of software developed particularly for the archives and also more generic word processing and data base management systems. In addition, the field should continue to prepare directed offerings for other newly emerging technologies, like the videodisk, optical character recognition systems, automatic voice transcription, electronic mail, and the implications of the chimera of a paperless society. Most importantly, the field must remain sufficiently flexible to respond to new changes and directions, as well as to push toward integrated information systems.

What this cursory overview is suggesting is that a burgeoning number of specialized offerings be developed in response to technological exigencies, but with the specific design of fostering an archival profession. While archivists must now borrow from other disciplines in regard to information management, the charge is to adapt that methodology--like those of the historian and librarian--to their purposes. The time has come to put away an identity crisis and become archivists. Archivists do have the "black box of appraisal" and an ongoing understanding of the complexity of the data in their charge. Those elements go beyond the management of information as a commodity. Archivists do have almost untapped resources and approaches to add to the general management of machine-readable data; moreover, they have a duty in this regard to

insure a proper documentary heritage.

In a related aside, the most exciting recent occurrence in advanced archival studies may be the success of the Mellon Fellowships in the study of modern archives (or Blouin's think tank) at the University of Michigan. To read in some of the broader implications of that venture, perhaps archivists can build a leg of truly archival theory through such institutes and educational efforts. Thus the very process of establishing ongoing continuing education in information management may indeed help produce as a by-product a specialized body of knowledge toward a distinct profession.

While such institutes and continuing education efforts in the automated aspects of information management are important, archivists should, at the same time, take a hard look at some of the problems inherent in too general a reliance on postappointment training. Above all, the field must plan to phase out introductory-level workshops or limit them to the training of technicians and demand adequate preappointment training as a prerequisite for future employment of professionals. The decision is to accept educational standards before continuing educational ones. Frank Burke, in one of the few specific mentions of continuing education in the literature, also raises some important questions on the quality of some of the postappointment institutes:

Much of what the student learns is vicarious, and there are no standards by which to establish an acceptable level of instruction, no examination of what the student has learned, and no corpus of literature built from research and tested in the classroom.

If continuing education courses must exist, then it behooves archivists to attend and promote only those offerings with clear standards: for example, those provided through reputable graduate programs. The other alternative is that holy quest for accreditation or individual certification, and the grail may well lie in the SAA's proposed archival

institute or the agency governing certification. Such a body can provide a mechanism for the issuance of continuing education units (CEUs) and provide a crucial level of regulation. The SAA, however, should also be aware of the dangers of its educational entrepreneurship and work to nurture--not compete with--inchoate archival graduate programs, which meet its guidelines.

The final problems are among the most difficult: time and money. Who and/or what institutions can afford the time and money to pay for such ongoing training? The probable answer is that, in time, parent institutions and the SAA in general will become aware of the need to fund constant re-education in the information technologies. Archivy, as the information field with the most to learn, should theoretically lead the pack in this recognition. But, until that miracle and with budgetary realities, individual archivists and a few farsighted institutions will likely bear the burden.

Whatever the general case for continuing education, archivists should now recognize the importance of adding the methodologies of information management to their portfolios. Furthermore, they should be aware that even newer skills, requiring a return for more training, will appear. Archivy cannot be blind to these exigencies. But such skills do not stand alone--they need to be synthesized with pre-existing humanistic and organizational training. The field is entering an information age with invaluable skills to add to this period. While some archivists can and should be allowed to remain in what are perfectly acceptable and justifiable monkish pursuits, others must meet the demands of modern society and create an archives for the age of Buck Rogers or Luke Skywalker.

NOTES

¹ In this paper, archivy will be used as a collective noun to describe the sum total of institutions and individuals which comprise the

archival community.

2 Lawrence McCrank, "Prospects for Integrating Historical and Information Studies in Archival Education," American Archivist 42 (1979): 443-55. This paper was originally presented at a session on continuing education at the 1984 meeting of the Society of American Archivists. It also must acknowledge a "Burkean Effect" from listening to Frank Burke's Archival Automation Workshop at the HiLS program at the University of Maryland.

3 That survey was sent out to all the educational programs listed in the SAA's Education Directory. The response rate was 43 percent and the other courses indicated as essential were an introduction to archives and archival theory, the management of archives and manuscripts collections, and a formal internship or practicum. At the top of the second, or extremely useful, category were courses in archival automation and machine-readable records. Details are available on demand.

4 Richard C. Berner, "Archival Education and Training in the United States, 1937 to Present," Journal of Education for Librarianship 22 (1981): 14-15.

5 Jake Knoppers, "Integrating Technologies-Integrating Disciplines?," ARMA Quarterly 17 (1983): 6.

6 American Library Association, Association of Records Managers and Administrators, American Association for State and Local History, Data Entry Management Association, and Special Libraries Association.

7 John Naisbitt, Megatrends (New York, 1982), 98.

8 Frank Burke, "Education," in Robert Clark,

ed., Archive-Library Relations (New York, 1976), 60.