

BENCHMARKING for records management EXCELLENCE

Sheila Taylor

To help employees better manage the records in their custody or control, many municipalities have implemented corporate initiatives, such as classification schemes, records retention schedules, policies, procedures and training. These initiatives are usually part of a corporate records management (RM) program designed to manage the life cycle (cradle to grave) of records in any media format (i.e. paper, electronic and microform).

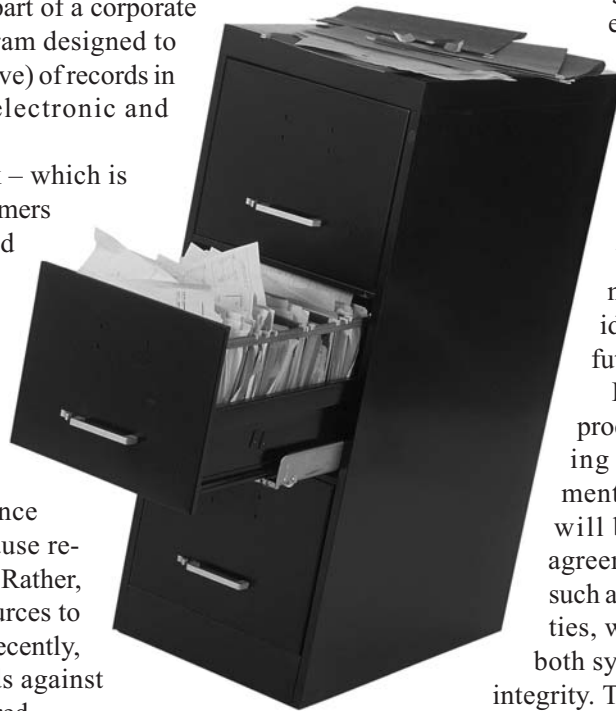
Aside from customer feedback – which is often negative, because few customers take the time to compliment good service – and special circumstances that put records management practices under the microscope (eg. locating documents needed for litigation), few municipalities regularly assess the performance of their RM programs. The absence of performance measurement does not arise because records are considered unimportant. Rather, it often stems from a lack of resources to conduct an assessment and, until recently, the lack of authoritative standards against which performance can be measured.

Benchmarking Standards

A municipality may choose to benchmark its RM program for many reasons, such as assessing inefficiencies, measuring progress in achieving a strategy or determining compliance with legislative record keeping requirements (eg. requirements for the admissibility of electronic records in court proceedings). Whatever the reason for the benchmarking exercise, performance is generally measured to identify, assess and determine a future course of action.

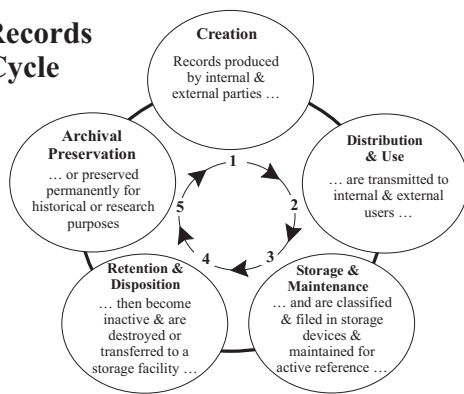
Benchmarking is a four-step process that begins with establishing the expectations or requirements against which performance will be measured. This requires agreement on performance levels in such areas as procedural responsibilities, work quality and quantity, and both system and process security and integrity. The second step is to document

how the performance will be evaluated, not only to ensure a systematic assessment, but also to provide the information necessary to replicate the performance measurement in the future. In the third step, data is gathered from various sources (eg. auditors who can comment on their experiences when interacting with the records management program, etc.) so that performance can be measured and assessed against the expectations or requirements set out in the first step. In the fourth step, any corrective action that is required is both planned and implemented.



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The Records Life Cycle



There are several standards that municipalities can reference when setting the benchmarking expectations or requirements against which their RM programs, or elements thereof, will be measured. Those standards are:

- ▶ the new International Standards Organization (ISO) standard¹ for assessing an organization's RM program;
- ▶ the Canadian General Standards Board (CGSB) standard for microfilm and electronic images as documentary evidence,² and the CGSB's forthcoming standard on electronic records as documentary evidence; and
- ▶ the record keeping requirements in quality management standards such as the ISO 9000 series.³

ISO Records Management Standard

Part 1 of the standard (ISO 15489-1) provides a framework for establishing a RM program and defines the outcomes or results that such a program should achieve, regardless of an organization's size, geographic location, line of business or amount of technology for managing records. The standard also sets out requirements for creating and maintaining authentic, reliable and useable records, and for protecting the records' integrity for as long as necessary to support the continuing conduct of business, compliance with the regulatory environment, and provision of the necessary accountability. Part 2 of the standard (ISO/TR 15489-2) provides an optional implementation guideline for achieving compliance with Part 1, and addresses such topics as policy development and the classification of records by function or business activity.

The ISO records management standard is a voluntary code of practice. Although there is currently no mechanism for external parties to certify compliance, the standard legitimizes records management as a global management discipline, while also providing an officially sanctioned benchmarking model for emulating best practices. Municipalities that choose to benchmark their RM programs against the standard will be able to identify not only areas for improvement within their existing programs, but also the additional components required to achieve a comprehensive and effective RM program.

In the absence of a certification process, there are three options for assessing compliance. First, a municipality's records manager or auditor could review the RM program and

make recommendations for improvement. Second, the municipality could engage an outside records management specialist to conduct the assessment. Third, two municipalities could pool their internal or external resources to assess their RM programs in turn.

Regardless of how the assessment is resourced, it is recommended that a checklist be developed to identify the performance criteria, providing space for capturing responses. The checklist could also include quantitative evaluation criteria to allow a grade to be determined for each performance criteria, thereby allowing the calculation of an overall grade (or percentage) of compliance. Ideally, the checklist would be completed using data obtained from various sources such as employee feedback (from both the customers and employees of the RM program), documentation reviews (assessing the existence, currency, comprehensiveness, etc. of program tools such as retention schedules) and walk-about (informal observations of the records storage areas used by the municipality). A good example of a quantitative checklist, as well as the results of a compliance assessment completed in the city clerk's office at the City of Edmonton, can be found online at <www.cccrecords.com>.

CGSB Standards

While the ISO 15489 standard provides a benchmark for assessing a RM program's performance, two Canadian standards set out parameters within which municipalities should design, implement and maintain systems for non-paper records to increase the likelihood that those records will be accepted as documentary evidence in court. Since 1993, the courts have referenced the CGSB standard, *Microfilm and Electronic Images as Documentary Evidence* (CAN/CGSB-72.11-93), when benchmarking the use of image technology (i.e. microfilm and scanned images). That standard provides guidelines for ensuring both the images and the systems in which they are created and stored are accurate, reliable and trustworthy. The forthcoming CGSB standard on electronic documents and signatures will provide the courts with guidelines against which a municipality's efforts to capture, store, retrieve, deliver and dispose of electronic records can be measured.

By designing, implementing and operating systems in compliance with these standards, municipalities will increase the probative value of their non-paper records, thereby increasing the likelihood of their acceptance in court as documentary evidence. It is recommended that the policies and procedures needed for compliance be developed and imple-

1 The standard and the technical report are available from the ISO online at <www.iso.ch/iso/en/prods-services/ISOstore/store.html> and authorized bookstores such as the ARMA International bookstore at <www.arma.org/Bookstore/default.cfm>.

2 The 1993 standard is available from the CGSB Sales Centre (1-800-665-CGSB). The electronic records standard will also be available from the CGSB Sales Centre when it is published next year.

3 The ISO 9000 series of quality management standards are also available from the ISO <www.iso.ch/iso/en/prods-services/ISOstore/store.html>.

mented by the municipality's records manager, IT specialist and representatives from the operating areas that use the system. It is also recommended that legal counsel be consulted.

ISO 9000 Standards

The ISO 9000 family of quality management standards also provide some records management benchmarks because they place importance on records as objective evidence of the activities or transactions that support the creation of quality products and services. The standards specify several requirements for quality records, including the ability to identify, collect, index, store and access the records while preventing their loss or damage and ensuring their retention in accordance with a records retention schedule.

As several municipalities have already discovered, records play an important role in achieving certification with the ISO 9000 series of standards. During the certification process, an ISO auditor will assess a municipal-

ity's record keeping practices as they relate to the product or service for which certification is sought (e.g. the process by which building permits are issued). That assessment can provide a performance measure for identifying areas for improvement.

Regular Objective Assessments

A municipal RM program should include regular performance assessments. The ISO records management and the other standards discussed in this article are useful resources for establishing performance measurements. Benchmarking against such external standards makes it possible to more objectively assess performance and more accurately identify areas needing improvement.

Benchmarking also provides a mechanism for adopting best practices that will enable a municipality to get the most out of its investment in a RM program, building confidence in the program and establishing a solid foundation for improvement. *MW*