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Up against the strength of traditions?

Stefanía Júlíusdóttir

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Ritstjórar: Gunnar Þór Jóhannesson og Helga Björnsdóttir

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HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

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Collections of public archives and records centres form some of the basic administrative tools that are needed for efficient work of public officials. To function as such they have to be systematically organized, preserved and securely kept. The same kind of importance applies to such collections in the private sector. In the public sector these collections are along with library collections and other collections of cultural material public property. In a demographic society public access to them is vital to enable the citizens to form opinions based on reliable knowledge of the state of affairs and for cultural reasons (Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, 2007/2001, p. 225; Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands, 2005; Schellenberg, 1975/1956, p. 3-10; Holmgren, 1994).

The findings of a 2001-survey on manpower requirements and on the number and kinds of service units in the area of libraries, archives and records management (ARM), indicated that the structure of the service units had changed greatly since the 1989-survey on manpower and service units of libraries. And that records management (RM) was the area that along with special librarianship had grown the most since 1989, when RM was beginning to be important as a working area for university educated staff (Stefanía Júlíusdóttir, 1997). In these two surveys quantitative data was collected (Stefanía Júlíusdóttir, 2007). While this development indicated increased career opportunities for university educated staff at ARM, a follow up interview study in 2005 provided mixed results. On the one hand librarians were considered to have a role to play at RM and on the other some of the interviewees in this area seemed unsure of their position (Stefanía Júlíusdóttir, 2008).

ARM is by nature an internal function dependent in part on external factors. In this paper some important external factors are considered, some of the findings of the 2005 interview study are discussed and placed in context with findings of the 2004-survey of the Icelandic National Archives (2005), the research of Gunnlaugsdóttir (2006), and some of the findings in the report of Rannsóknarnefnd Alþingis (the Special Investigation Commission) (2010a, 2010b) concerning records generation and records management in the Icelandic financial sector and at the Financial Supervisory Authority – Iceland (FME). The aim is to examine whether discrepancies found in the ARM in the studies consulted can be considered due to inadequate external factors or whether their causes are internal.

External factors

External factors take place outside of organizations and are not under their control while possibly affecting them greatly. By nature they are environmental factors, the most important are regulatory, normative, educational, and technical factors shortly addressed below.

Regulatory factors

Regulatory factors stipulate what can, may, or has to be done. In the area of public ARM the most important regulatory factor is the National Archives act (Lög um Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands no 66/1985). It provides clear stipulations on the authority of the National Archives over how public records shall be kept with regard to

organization, retention, preservation and security. Other important acts are the Administration procedures act (Stjórnsýslulög, 1993), the Information act (Upplýsingalög, 1996) and the Privacy act (Lög um persónuvernd og meðferð persónuupplýsinga no. 77/2000). They specify what kind of access is permitted and by whom. The last named act is important in collections in all sectors where records on individuals are kept (Gunnlaugsdóttir, 2006). In addition acts pertaining to the operation of the mother organization of the records and archival collection are important for work there.

Most regulatory factors of importance in this respect are of Icelandic origin (Eva Margrét Ævarsdóttir & Hafðís Ólafsdóttir, 2007).

Normative factors

Normative factors form a sort of guidelines on how to accomplish given tasks pertaining to vital actions in this area. Most of them originate abroad at international non-governmental standards organizations (INGO's) (Guðrún Rögnvaldardóttir, 2007), such as the International Standards Organisation (ISO) and other national and international standards organisations. An important example is the RM standard translated into Icelandic around the turn of the millennium (Gunnlaugsdóttir, 2002; Jóhanna Gunnlaugsdóttir, 2003a, 2003b; ÍST-ISO, 2001a, 2001b).

Educational factors

Educational possibilities in ARM leading to degrees have been available at the University of Iceland both within the programme of History since 1974 and that of Library and Information Science since 1979 (Guðmundsson, 2000). In addition continuing educational courses are offered by the Institute of Continuing Education at the University of Iceland, the Icelandic Records Management Association (IRMA) and the Icelandic National Archives. The last named institution, furthermore publishes books and booklets, and provides material on its homepage and on paper on ARM (Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands, 2008) (Félag um skjalastjórn, 2009). More educational possibilities in Iceland and abroad are on the Internet, both formal degree programmes, and occasional continuing educational courses.

Technical factors

At present the development of the computer and its use in records generation and management is of vital importance in this area. This calls for systematic organisation of long term storage of the electronic archival collections and databases both at the National Archives where public archives are preserved for present and future use and in the private sector. The need for co-ordinated systematic organization of records began to be felt around 1990 (Gunnlaugsdóttir, 2006, p. 13), brought on by new trends in government and industry, legal requirements and standards, that all called for increased emphasis on knowledge management and hence RM since harnessed knowledge becomes records (Gunnlaugsdóttir, 2006, p. 16-19, 39-42) and documents amassed in electronic databases. To cope with these needs for organisation of and access to e-documents, use of electronic records management systems (ERMS) that were developed in various groupware systems has increased steadily in Iceland (Gunnlaugsdóttir, 2006, p. 13).

Internal factors

Internal factors have to do with the internal operation of organizations and are under their control. Two large studies have been done in Iceland on internal management in the study area. The 2004-survey of the National Archives on the situation in archives

in publicly operated organizations, regarding automation and operation of e-databases (Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands, 2005); and the PhD project of Jóhanna Gunnlaugsdóttir that was completed in 2006 and focuses on the implementation and use of electronic RM systems (ERMS) in organizations in Iceland (Gunnlaugsdóttir, 2006).

2004-survey of the National Archives

The National Archives plays a vital part in the e-governance of the nation by being at the receiving end of public e-archives and responsible for their organization, security and preservation, and to provide access to them presently and in the future (Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands, 2005; 2008, p. 47-56). Work on the e-archives started in the 1990's; a committee founded in 1997 surveyed the situation in Iceland and familiarised itself with similar projects abroad. It found that one of the basic requirements for the success of a project on e-archives was that they be structured and organized in a standardized way when delivered to the National Archives (Nefnd um varðveislu tölvugagna sem verða til í stjórnsýslunni, 1998). In accordance with governmental policies (Forsætisráðuneytið, 2004) a second committee was appointed to work on the e-archives project in the summer of 2004 (Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands, 2005, p. 4-5). As a part of that project the situation in archives of publicly operated organisations, including the ministry and its main organizations was surveyed in 2004. Respondents were questioned on systematic ARM and automation of that function and on their operation of e-databases. According to the findings around 40% of respondents did not document information on the records they generated and received in a systematic, standardized fashion, around 80% did not have records retention schedules while some 46% had ERMS necessary for e-governance and around 64% used e-databases as a part of their operations. On the average each one operated 3.6 databases (Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands, 2005, p. 1-9).

The PhD project of Jóhanna Gunnlaugsdóttir 2006

The aim of this research project was to investigate how ERMS were implemented and used in Icelandic organizations; what were the perceived objectives of implementing such systems, how successful the implementation was and if private and public organizations differed in this respect. Furthermore, if and how employees used ERMS and how they felt about using them; and if they did not use ERMS what they used instead. And how the way in which the ERMS were implemented affected the success of their use?

According to the findings eight objectives were mentioned by interviewees as reasons for implementing ERMS:

[...] increased productivity, improved customer/client services, anticipated cost savings, reduced space required to store documents, integrated work procedures, gaining a better overview of cases and better meeting legal requirements (Gunnlaugsdóttir, 2006, p. 235).

There was neither much of a difference between individual ERMS nor between public and private organizations, apart from the public ones placing more emphasis on saving storage space and being concerned with legal stipulations granting individuals access to information about themselves. Even when ERMS had been acquired support from top management was sometimes lacking in the implementation process. This resulted in a failure in the implementation process and subsequently affected the degree and quality of the ERMS's use, with the result that they were not used or not used successfully by all employees (Gunnlaugsdóttir, 2006, p. 235-237).

Interview Study in 2005

During the 1980's important developments significant of the growing importance of ARM in Icelandic society took place. A new act on the Icelandic National Archives was passed in 1985, and IRMA was founded in 1988. The interview study under discussion here forms a part of a larger study in the area of libraries and ARM, undertaken to detect the effects that social changes and technical developments are having on career opportunities and the working environment in the study area. Some of the findings of this project have already been reported in *Þjóðarspeggill* (Stefanía Júlíusdóttir, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009). The interviews were taken in 2005 with five chosen directors and consultants at ARM that were handpicked. They were key persons or leading authorities in the field and had in addition to formal education gained knowledge through working in the study area. The interviews were semi-structured, carried out in a single session that lasted from an hour and a half to three and a half hours and the interviewer used a topic guide (see also Stefanía Júlíusdóttir, 2008). The greatest limitation of this study is the small sample size of the interviewees that makes any conclusions indecisive.

For preparing the interviews I used Moore's book on how to do research (Moore, 2000). Prior to this study a number of amalgamations of large organizations had taken place in Iceland, and a number of public once had been privatized as a result of regulatory changes. These developments had clearly affected the study area.

Findings

In the 1989-survey units reported as having an ARM function were 1.6% of the total survey units. Although it was known that a handful of public libraries were also responsible for the municipal archives this was not reported; by also considering them this percentage could have been brought up to around 3%, at the most. Special libraries were around 12.5% of the survey units and ARM was the responsibility of special librarians in 13% of these libraries. While in 2001, reportedly around 21% of the total survey units were either solely concerned with ARM work or doing so in amalgamation with work in some library type. At that time the National Library of Iceland – University Library was the only library type that did not report responsibility for ARM, but possesses all the same archival collection in its Manuscript Department. Of the 21% around 44% were solely in the area of ARM. Special libraries were around 18% and some 53% of them were also responsible for ARM. Apart from special libraries the library type most commonly amalgamated with ARM were public libraries of which some 5% also had the responsibility for municipal archives. However, as indicated in the response from records managers they were unsure of their positions. One said that “possibly a less expensive staff member will be hired to replace me when I have set up the RM system and made it functional.” Another one linked career opportunities at ARM in private companies in general to their success by saying that when they are doing well they hire university educated records managers, but when money is scarce these positions are discontinued (Stefanía Júlíusdóttir, 2008).

The interviewees deemed regulatory events to have great effect. They all deemed the National Archives act of vital importance, and likewise the Information act and said that it had greatly increased demand for records managers and consultants in this area particularly in the public sector, because it calls for public records to be kept in a systematic fashion and it is effective retrospectively. The Administration procedures act and the Privacy act were also named in this respect; the latter for its importance for ARM of all organizations that keep personal records. Moreover they said that all organizations private as well as public have to operate in accordance with regulatory stipulations; and that regulatory changes had altered the roles of their organizations

and thereby that of the ARM, because public organizations are established according to regulatory stipulations. When setting up records management (RM) systems, developing records retention schedules and weeding, regulatory stipulations have to be taken into consideration. Organizations that co-operate with foreign parties and those that operate abroad as well as in Iceland also have to abide to foreign regulatory factors as well as the Icelandic ones, such as those of the European Union and in some cases international ones. Regulatory factors are seen to act as a frame for RM; they support RM programmes, and are important when teaching RM to employees that handle organizational records as a part of their work. However one interviewee, a consultant said that RM does not necessarily comply with legal acts, even though obligatory by law. And that in some organizations systematic RM was not practiced. According to the same interviewee there is neither a tradition to follow regulatory stipulations nor to use standards at RM work in Iceland. Moreover, this interviewee said that consultancy work had changed with time. “We used to be hired to set up RM systems for organizations”, but at the time of the interview more of the clients preferred to get education and guidance on how to set up such a system and have their own staff do that work. This is interesting because more of the interviewees said that staff gets far too little education on regulatory factors pertaining to the RM of their organizations.

Likewise the interviewees deemed normative factors like standards important. One interviewee said that they function like guidelines or directives on how to conduct RM. They mentioned the ÍST-ISO 15498 standards on RM noted above, the ISO 17799 (BS7799) on information security and the ISO 9000 standards on quality control in that respect. Standards were both seen to change the way the work is done and to increase the work load particularly the last named ones. Thereby they increased the demand for records managers and consultants in this area especially in the private sector. Considering that standards originate internationally this development is indicative of Iceland being a member of the international community.

Education is clearly important. All of the interviewees were offered their positions or had set up their consultancy businesses based on their university education, their work experience and sometimes special education additionally, in the field of their organization. Moreover knowledge relating to technical developments and to regulatory and normative factors was considered important. To further their education four out of the five interviewees were enrolled in formal university degree programmes at the time of the interviews. Some were also responsible for the special library of their organization, but that was a secondary function by importance. Knowledge needed for the ARM was by all considered to be that of organizing collections in a structured and systematic fashion in order to be able to retrieve needed items accurately and quickly; and knowledge of regulatory and normative factors pertaining to ARM. Those working at public archives placed emphasis on knowledge of the history of public administration and languages while those at RM placed emphasis on structured and systematic organization.

Technical developments were deemed to affect work in this area greatly. While they do not change the roles of the organizations and the roles of their archives and records centres like the regulatory factors do, they have revolutionized the way in which the roles are fulfilled. The technical possibilities bring new tasks and increased demands for instant online access. More and more material is scanned to fulfil such requirements, both for use internally and externally in particularly in public organizations. This brings the services closer to the public. And it means increased work even though general staff themselves saves the documents and records in the system and ARM staff only monitors what they do. Moreover some of the interviewees said that they were able to work from home and take part in distance

degree educational programmes also from home, which saved them time and money (Stefanía Júlíusdóttir, 2008).

Report of the Special Investigation Commission, 2010

The Special Investigation Commission was established by Althingi (the Icelandic parliament) in December 2008 to investigate developments leading to the collapse of the Icelandic financial system in 2008 (Rannsóknarnefnd Alþingis, 2010a, 2010b). In view of the findings of the two studies on ARM discussed above and the 2005 interview study it is interesting to see how records creation and ARM is rated in the Report of the Special Investigation Commission. In the Report serious problems are found with records creation and the RM systems and their use both in the collapsed financial organizations and at the Financial Supervisory Authority – Iceland (FME). This made the work of the Commission difficult at times and in some cases it was even impossible to find out how and why things had happened the way they did by consulting records (Rannsóknarnefnd Alþingis, 2010a, p. 50, 127, 143, 2010b, p. 56, 85, 107-109, 111-112, 146-153). In some cases decisions on big loans were taken in a bank without holding a meeting according to the rules of the bank, in other cases no minutes were kept of decisions of such meetings, in still other cases no contracts were to be found on big loans, or such contracts were unsigned. Rules of conduct and guidelines on how to reach important decisions were not available in writing. Written information on debtors of some of the banks, even the big ones was missing (Rannsóknarnefnd Alþingis, 2010b, p. 108-109). Creation and management of records concerning collaterals for loans to customers were far from being satisfactory to say the least (Rannsóknarnefnd Alþingis, 2010a, p. 127). In the area of records creation or the lack thereof, there are also examples of important documents being undated (Rannsóknarnefnd Alþingis, 2010a, p. 50, Vol. 5, p. 286), no documented information being available on some of the important meetings called for by FME in financial organizations, because the meetings had neither been formally called nor were the minutes of such meetings properly recorded if at all recorded in writing (Rannsóknarnefnd Alþingis, 2010b, p. 56, 85). The RM system at FME had serious shortcomings. Its structure left a lot to be desired. Some aspects of it were imperfect or not functional at all and its use lacked consistency. Thus it is described in the Report that each case is identified in two ways: by a case number and by a term indicating its subject. The choice of terms for subject identification of cases appears not to have been from a standard list of subject terms but rather from the top of the heads of individual staff members. In the example given in the Report eleven different subject terms were used for the same kind of a subject rendering the subject search in the RM system useless in some instances (Rannsóknarnefnd Alþingis, 2010b, p. 86, 148, 151-153).

Discussion

The external factors can all be deemed adequate, and a 2008 study of external factors by Magnús Guðmundsson Archivist and Records and Information Manager, University of Iceland reveals that the same kinds of external factors are still the most important, although new editions and new titles of the normative factors have been issued. In the public sector the requirements of knowledge on public administration and languages are likewise still the same (Guðmundsson, 2008).

In view of the adequacy of the external factors and the importance of access to properly created and kept records and documents for administrative, financial, historical and cultural purposes, it is surprising to find that all the studies consulted and the 2005-interview study indicate that these matters were far from being in order. And it does seem that internal factors are to blame. Only 60% of respondents in the 2004-survey of the National Archives managed their records in a systematic fashion (Þjóðskjalasafn, 2005, p. 1-9) even though the Information act clearly states that this has to be done and it is considered the basis for effective ARM (Þjóðskjalasafn, 2005, p. 8). Moreover lack of support from top management led in some cases to insufficient or incorrect use of ERMS and hence their benefits were only partly realized (Gunnlaugsdóttir, 2006). And according to the report of the Special Investigation Commission important records were not always created and when created they were sometimes not properly managed, and were therefore of limited or not use, when difficult or impossible to find.

Could the reason for the state of ARM as reported above be the lack of respect for regulatory and normative factors as described by one of the interviewees in the 2005-study? And can it be that this kind of behaviour is tolerated by society and the authorities because by tradition it is culturally accepted in Iceland that authoritative persons decide for themselves whether to abide to regulatory stipulations or not? In this respect it is interesting to note that regulatory stipulations to the effect of the Information act were passed in some of the countries Iceland is sometimes compared to a couple of hundred years ago, namely in Sweden in 1766 (Holmgren, 1994) and in France in 1796 (Schellenberg, 1975/1956). After such an act was finally passed in Iceland in 1996 authorities seem to have been reluctant to manage records in such a way that the Information act is effective. If this behaviour is due to traditional disrespect for regulatory stipulation, that tradition has to be broken. To find out if this is the case research is needed on the attitude of Icelanders in general to law breaking of authoritative persons when it comes to ARM and of the attitude of the authoritative persons themselves to such behaviour.

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Reflection

A general reflection cannot be made because of the small sample size. But the tentative findings of this paper may reflect that improvements are unlikely unless there is a change in attitude amongst authoritative individuals towards legal acts and ARM.

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