



Classification: The understudied concept

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ABSTRACT

In the field of records and information management (RIM), classification is central for categorizing information including those embedded in records into a systematic structure for controlling and retrieval purposes. It is particularly a paramount concept and activity for information-related organization to organize and manage information from the beginning of its creation to disposal. The evolution of classification has diversified in applications in regards with the discipline of study including archival, library and information science. The need of classification has become more urgent in technology environment where information is easily created. However, technology has caused the authenticity and the integrity of information can be easily tampered and challenged. Technology together with the absence of classification has caused problems in dealing with information particularly in the aspect of storage. When classification is under-explored and minimally understood albeit its importance, the management of digital information becomes risky thus, affect to obscure decision making and provocation by laws. Therefore, it is essential that the concept is explored and be applied to ensure information/digital information created, maintained and preserved are in context, trustworthy, authentic and conform to standards and regulations. This paper discusses the concept of classification from various field so as to make clear why classification is significant to the records management field although is more popular in library science.

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1. Introduction

Classification is a management tool that provides for a systematic arrangement of objects into groups or categories (Franks, 2013), and is commonly used for systematic identification and arrangement of business activities and/or records into categories according to logically structured conventions, methods, and procedural rules as represented in a classification system (ISO 15489-1, 2001). In business, classification is a process that helps an organization describe, organize, and control information that builds upon an analysis of the organization's business activities. In records and information management (RIM), classification is a key foundational element which used to systematize information and facilitate retrieval. However, the concept has been better established in the library science field than in records management.

This paper is intended to investigate classification from a records management perspective. It has been noted in this regard that the concept is both understudied and not well understood. Research has shown that good records management strengthens

government services by supporting business continuity; security and risk management; legal compliance and accountability; evidence-based decision making and transparency; good governance and public trust; good performance and government capability building (An, Shuyang, & Wei, 2011). Without proper understanding of such classification, it may be difficult or impossible to implement an efficient and effective records management initiative that addresses the complete life cycle of records from creation to preservation. Although classification plays a key role in the preservation of records over time, such systems may be overlooked or neglected when information systems to manage digital records are developed and implemented in favour of those elements of the records life cycle that focus on earlier stages such as storage and retrieval. Consequently, vast quantities of digital records have remained poorly managed over time.

The terms 'classification' and 'arrangement' were used synonymously in Schellenberg's modern archives approach without confronting extensively on the complexities of classification. On the other hand, Jenkinson's manual discussed the topic appropriately in different terms such as 'differentiation' and the placing' of records (MacLean, 1956; Schellenberg, 1956). The use of the classification and arrangement terminology has narrowed the implementation of both, as arrangement has been defined as a process of arrangement that reflected inventory processes, and using terms such as 'groups',

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'sub-groups', 'series', and 'items', while the terms 'placement' and 'differentiation' have been used less often.

Classification based on functions and activities has been preferred for controlling information and records, and is based on classifying records according to why records exist, rather than record topic. That is, it focuses on the context and use of records, rather than their content. A function-based classification system benefits organizations because it provides the following: an understanding of the relationship between the business and its records; identification of records required for their evidential value; prioritization of records for business value; and facilitation of retention decisions. The classification of records is a holistic concept based on the functions of an organization. A records classification scheme, also known as a file plan, is a process that may be used to categorize or group records into retrieval units. A file plan used to classify records based on business activities that generate records, and derives directly from an organization's business classification scheme. It is typically represented as a directory or folder structure such as function → activity → topic → subtopic (Franks, 2013).

Most studies tend to emphasize the technological aspects of classification, particularly how to automate classification, even though a theory of classification has yet to be developed (Hjørland & Pedersen, 2005). Records management specialists are driven by time and space to study many subjects, but generally they do not closely examine classification, because this area has been deliberately monopolized by LIS and computer specialists. The lack of research on classification from a records management perspective has impacted the related literature, the manual or automatic development of classification systems, and the implementation of classification schemes. This is due to a number of factors including the following: complexity of defining record characteristics; a thorough preliminary study of organizations; and detailed documentary analysis to ensure that records are correctly selected and classified. These processes are tedious, and records management researchers need to conduct further studies in this area. Most records management professionals have examined other areas, such as appraisal, preservation, or standards (Mai, 2004; Hjørland, 2008; Xie, 2008).

Classification is made up of several related principles including access, retrieval, maintenance, retention and disposal. A classification system should be based on the size and volume of a company and the volume of its records, how and by whom records are used, and how quickly records could be accessed (Schellenberg, 1956; Wallace, Lee, & Schubert, 1992). Classification systems allow records to be accessed easily, with the ability to retrieve all records including annotations and attachments, in the context of which the records belong. These systems also allow records to be maintained in their own context throughout life cycle, and preserved or destroyed based on classification comprehensive retention schedules that provide either control over preservation and custody, or justification for the destruction of records (MacNeil, 2002).

The application of classification differs among various groups within the information management community, namely librarians, archivists, records managers, and information technology people. For example, librarians classify content based on subjects and this works well with discrete or stand-alone items such as books or maps (Xie, 2007). IT professionals, on the other hand, classify documents by building models that can correctly predict the class of different objects; this in turn assists in allowing organizations to systematically organize, access, and process documents (Mohd Juzaiddin, 2004). Classification may also be associated with the categorization of records and documents based on the degree of secrecy and functionality of records. This study adopts the latter definition based on records function.

2. Classification from the perspectives of various fields

This section discusses the concepts of classification as found in the Archival Science, Library Science, and Information Science fields (Foscarini, 2009; Livelton, 1996; Orr, 2005; Xie, 2006). These fields have commonly been discussed in earlier classification research. At the end of this section is a discussion on the differences between classification from the library and archival perspectives.

2.1. Classification from archival science and records management perspective

Archival science is a systematic body of theory that supports the practice of appraising, acquiring, authenticating, preserving, and providing access to recorded materials. It emerged from diplomatic work in the nineteenth century as a body of concepts and methods directed towards the study of records in terms of their documentary and functional relationships and the ways in which they are controlled and communicated (Duranti & MacNeil, 1997).

Archival science theories have contributed to the records management field, which is responsible for the systematic control of the creation, maintenance, use and disposition of records (Pearce-Moses & Davis, 2008). There are two types of archival theory (Murdoch, 2007). The first type describes and explains archival procedures and activities, such as devising arrangement schemes, defining series, and reconstructing provenance. The second type is concerned with the content and context of records, rather than rote processes of control (Roberts, 1990).

The field of archival science plays an important role in the development of a records classification system because the theory provides the basis for identifying the context, content and structure of records, determining the authenticity and reliability of records, and preserving records from the creation to preservation stage. The classification of records operates on a principle whereby records are grouped on the basis of a function or activity (Pearce-Moses & Davis, 2008). It is based on an analysis of functions and activities in relation to organizations' mandate and business processes (Xie, 2007).

Classification is not just used as a retrieval tool. If one understands classification as a mere retrieval tool, then its role in the context of electronic records systems would be outdated or excessive, given the highly sophisticated search engines which are usually embedded in those systems. Therefore, to avoid misperceptions or misunderstandings of context, it is important that classification is seen as offering other value for ensuring management is efficient, effective, and competitive (Foscarini, 2009). ICA (2008a, 2008b, 2008c) and HB5031 (2011) assert that the classification of records enables the following:

- i. work to be linked to form a continuous record of activity;
- ii. changes to the way business activity is described to be recorded and documented;
- iii. meaning to be passed on to those who may not have been directly involved in the business that was undertaken;
- iv. work to be distributed to appropriate people and groups;
- v. management responsibility for sets of records to be distributed;
- vi. link to security and access permissions to be applied to records; and link to disposal periods and actions to be applied to records.

Therefore, the purpose of record classification is not solely to either describe content or enable search and retrieval. Rather, records classification is most often used to support a whole suite of records management processes, including identifying records to be captured and created to support businesses and providing a structure for determining and implementing retention, security, and access decisions, as well as to place records in the context of

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