Supported by the European Commission

Archiving by Design

This document was prepared by the European Archives Group and provides a definition of Archiving by Design as one of the new principles of European information governance. The concept of sustainable accessibility to information is the premise for a pan-European approach for the records management community and archives to address the challenges of digital transformation.

Problem statement

Digital transformation keeps altering the playing field in which we operate as an archival and records management community.

- Information is everywhere, and its growth is exponential.
- Information takes on new forms.
- Information is used and re-used in novel ways utilizing new technologies.

Traditional approaches for archives and records management no longer prove to be effective in the public sector. Information created or received might never reach the dedicated archival or records management systems we have created. There is too much information to manage, and digital information has to be available from the first moment in the life cycle to be used and reused outside the primary working process. It is time consuming and expensive to optimize in retrospect the accessibility of information that already has been created. Traditional archiving is perceived as an activity that starts after the working process is finished. It is more effective when information systems are designed in such a way that future accessibility of information is secured. When this is combined with early identification of the existence and value of information, with management of the entire life cycle, information of enduring value will be preserved and accessed in digital archives more efficiently.

The need to link and share data, to re-use it for the public, scientific and private sector is growing with the aim to create a single European data space on a single market. Design of information systems should be following this goal (e.g. implementation of Data Governance Act) as previously embodied in principles like Open by Default and Privacy by Design.

The records management community is currently failing to deliver on the public values that the archival and records management community stands for, confronted with problems such as:

- Trustworthy or complete information is not available for decision making, which decreases the quality of public service.
- Lack of transparency because information is difficult to find declines the trust in public institutions.
- The economic potential of open data and the re-use of public sector information, e.g. based on Open-Data Directive, cannot be fulfilled because data is unavailable and/or its quality is compromised because of lacking usage of authentic sources and incomplete descriptions of data models and datasets, which leads to stagnation of innovation and economic growth.
- Information with cultural and historical research value created in unmanaged information systems environments is in danger of being lost forever.

Solution

To deal with these challenges, it is necessary to take measures even before information is created or received. We call this Archiving by Design.

The definition of Archiving by Design is “During the design or adjustment of information systems, the appropriate measures are taken to ensure that the information becomes, and stays, sustainably accessible”.

Sustainable accessibility consists of six high-level quality requirements. Sustainably accessible information is:

- **Findable**: Information can be found quickly and easily by anyone that should have access to the information.
- **Available:** Information is available to (re)use for any given purpose, by any given actor at any given moment, as far as legally allowed.
- **Readable:** Information can be visualized and can be processed by people and/or machines.
- **Interpretable:** The meaning of information is clear, and it is known by whom it was created, in which context and for which purpose.
- **Reliable:** Information is trusted and complete and based on correct data so that it can be reused.
- **Future proof:** Information can be (re)used during its entire lifecycle because sustainably accessible information is resilient to changes over time in organization, technology or processes.

In the concept of Archiving by Design, these high-profile quality requirements are being translated into practically implementable improvement measures that are technology neutral. Archiving is therefore never the sole incentive for change, incentives could also come from areas like new user and business needs, regulatory developments and digital opportunities. To be successful it is necessary to collaborate with other information and data specialists such as architects, security and privacy officers. There is a lot of relevant knowledge among professionals who do not necessarily identify themselves as part of the archival field. We encourage the commercial sector to use and build services based on the Archiving by Design concept and guidelines, although implementation may differ in European countries (e.g. obligatory assessment of public sector information systems).

Ideally Archiving by Design becomes part of the DNA of any information producing organization.

Conclusion

The archives and records management community needs to proactively engage their mindset, skills and insights in designing the new information landscape. We cannot foresee all the challenges that digital transformation will impose on the field of archives in the future, and we cannot identify, reshape and redescribe all legally, administratively and historically valuable information in hindsight. The concept of Archiving by Design is a proposed first approach to ensure that the information becomes, and stays, sustainably accessible, and offers a mindset and methodology for this. Going forward there will be other important issues that need to be addressed like sustainability in general, freedom of data and digital ecosystems.

The European Archives Group subgroup on Archiving by Design provides a toolbox to help the wider records management community to implement Archiving by Design. The tools are based on solid research and best practices from different member states.