

Achieving Professional Excellence for a New Century

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With the increasing importance of records, information, and knowledge as corporate assets, the role of the information professionals who must manage these assets is more critical than ever before. Also, the qualifications needed to manage these corporate assets will be more demanding, especially if the various challenges of the new century are to be met. In this article, the author, a distinguished educator in the field, discusses these critical qualifications and gives some suggestions on how to achieve them.

Since the mid-1950s, the information age has "swept across history," as Alvin Toffler observed in his book *The Third Wave* (1980). During these 40 years, increasingly rapid changes have had a profound effect on the records and information management profession. Paperwork management was transformed into records management and then into information management, and now another transformation involving knowledge management, seems to be emerging. In his book *Powershift* (1990), Toffler suggested, "[I]t is now indisputable that knowledge, the source of the highest-quality power of all, is gaining importance with every fleeting nanosecond."

An additional perspective on the accelerating changes of the future were presented in an interview in a *Los Angeles Times* article (Proffitt 1998) with futurist Peter Schwartz. He said, "People simply know more today and have more information surrounding them than ever before. The ubiquity of the media and the '24-hour news cycle' are all part of that. And there is simply more

knowledge out there. At the middle of this century, it took about 20 years for the sum total of human knowledge to double. Today, it's roughly every five years. [At this increasing rate] in 2020 it will be every 73 days!"

A recent article in the *Harvard Business Review* suggested that in today's economy every business is really an information business (Evans and Wurster 1997). According to the authors, "[I]n many industries not widely considered information businesses, information actually represents a large percentage of the cost structure. About one-third of the cost of health care in the United States – approximately \$300 billion – is the cost of capturing, storing, and processing such information as patients' records, physicians' notes, test results, and insurance claims. More fundamentally, information is the glue that holds together the structure of all businesses."

Now that we are on the brink of the new century and realize that records, information, and knowledge are major assets in business and government, the role of the manager of these assets will be

more sophisticated and more critical than ever before. Also, the professional qualifications of this manager are – and will be – more important than ever. Some of these qualifications are very similar to those of the past and the present, but many of them will be quite different.

Those who are successful in managing information assets must have educational qualifications that are comprehensive enough to enable them to deal with all of the varied problems that are anticipated in this new knowledge age. The demands on the teachers and the organizations that must deliver this needed education are also more pressing than ever. Because of the rapid changes, especially in technology, educators must continually ask themselves: “What must we teach our students today that will not be obsolete tomorrow?”

An information professional in the next century must continue to have an eclectic background as well as highly specialized knowledge and expertise. This educational background will consist of several definitive components:

- a clear perception of the impact of the information age on a rapidly changing world
- a knowledge of the functional areas of a business organization
- a strong view of organizational behavior
- excellent communication skills
- a specialized understanding of the basic fundamental concepts of information management that may be applied to information created in any medium
- a mastery of computer applications with a clear perception of the impact of the computer in the future

In addition to this educational background, information professionals must have a high level of ethical sensitivity, a strong interest in

professionalism, and a commitment to life-long learning. Information professionals who possess these qualifications, along with the needed education, will realize a true competitive advantage for their own personal success as well as for the success of the organizations for which they work.

Understanding the Impact of the Information Age

To be successful, information managers must have a clear understanding of the concept of the “information age” and how this age is impacting a rapidly changing world. John Naisbitt, in his book *Megatrends* (1982), suggests that we actually entered the information age in 1956 when, for the first time in American history, white-collar workers outnumbered blue-collar workers, and most people were working with information rather than producing goods in a factory. He also contended that the beginning of the globalization of the information revolution began in 1957 when the Russians launched Sputnik. Toffler referred to the information age as the “third wave of civilization,” and used such terms as “space age,” “electronic era,” and “global village” to describe the breadth of his concept.

Since the information age is having such a major global impact, the social, economic, and scientific implications of this impact must also be understood if information is to be managed effectively. A very important aspect deals with the intercultural changes that are occurring in our own communities as well as the international changes that are having a profound effect on virtually all business organizations. The current international financial upheavals must be watched closely. Some current ticking bombs in the world according to Jonathan Peterson of the *Los Angeles Times* (1998) are the future of Brazil, Japan’s commitment to economic reform, and China’s economic health.

In *Future Shock*, published in 1970, Toffler noted:

In the three short decades between now and the 21st century, millions of ordinary, psychologically normal people will face an abrupt collision with the future. Citizens of the world’s richest and most technologically advanced nations, many of them will find it increasingly painful to keep up with the incessant demand for change that characterizes our time. For them, the future will have arrived too soon.

If we do not understand how the future may change the world in which we live, we will have no hope of understanding how to cope with these changes. At the undergraduate level, university curricula require a general education component within degree programs in an attempt to help students understand the larger implications of these changes in the world. Charles Handy reflected this concern in his book *The Age of Paradox* (1994): “The important question is whether we shall all be heading in the same general direction.”

The Path to Management Success

Today’s information professional must understand something about all of the functional areas of an organization and about the information created in each area. These areas would include accounting, finance, marketing, human resources, production, operations, management information systems, and office systems. The model program for a bachelor’s degree in records and information management as proposed by the Professional Development Committee of ARMA International reflects many of these functional areas. Requirements for accreditation of a business school by the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business also include coverage of concepts of these functional areas.

Team Work

Team work ranks near the top of the list of factors that lead to management success – today and into the next century. Where once individual achievement was the most highly prized type of accomplishment, employees of any organization today and in the future must be able to work in a cooperative way – in team projects, in committees, and in task forces. Teaching methods in university courses are showing an increased emphasis on these types of cooperative activities for improved education.

The concept of “synergy” actually means cooperative effort – the results of the group are greater than the results of individuals in that group. In his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989), Stephen R. Covey identified habit number 6 as “Synergize – Principles of Creative Cooperation.” One example he gave of a synergistic process is the creation of a corporate mission statement. Wrote Covey: “[O]nce people have experienced real synergy, they are never quite the same again. They know the possibility of having other such mind-expanding adventures in the future.”

Sometimes the important role of “people” in an organizational system is overlooked in today’s highly technological and process-driven world. In addition to an understanding of information technology, however, the information professional must never forget that people make the systems work. In *Megatrends 2000* (1990), John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene stated, “The most exciting breakthroughs of the 21st century will occur not because of technology, but because of an expanding concept of what it means to be human.”

Communication Skills

Another leading factor that enhances management success is the development of excellent skills in oral and written communication. The American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business has an accreditation standard that requires the

inclusion of oral and written communication in a business curriculum. Most colleges of business are placing increased emphasis in these areas, and yet many reports reveal that graduates are not achieving the level in communication needed – especially in their writing skills.

A person has only to look at current classified advertisements in any newspaper to realize the importance of good communication. The most frequently cited competencies needed for almost any job at any level are “excellent writing and speaking skills.” According to Scott Ober in his book *Contemporary Business Communication* (1998):

- A survey of recent business graduates ranked communication as the most important area of knowledge for initial employment as well as for advancement and promotion.
- A survey of 6,000 people found that the most annoying habit of American bosses was poor communication.
- 80 percent of the managers at 402 firms surveyed nationwide said most of their employees need to improve their writing skills, up from 65 percent the previous year; yet only 21 percent of the firms offer training in writing skills.

Communication skills are becoming even more important as we move into the knowledge age. Information cannot be synthesized into usable knowledge without excellent communication, and information professionals must take the lead in seeing that they are highly proficient in this area.

Records Management Fundamentals

Any information professional will need to understand the basic concepts of the fundamental areas of a records management program. These concepts have evolved during the last four decades and will continue to evolve and change as we are further immersed in the knowledge society. An understanding of these concepts will be critical in helping information managers control information resources created in all media – paper, microforms, and electronic.

During the contemporary development of records management, there has not always been clear regarding the varied areas that actually comprise the field of records management. To provide data to aid in the revision of a course in records administration systems at California State University, Northridge, a survey was conducted in 1996 of records and information managers throughout

Table 1 Ranked Priorities for Areas of Records and Information Management

FUNCTION	MEAN
Records Retention Schedules	3.07
Computer Based Information Retrieval	3.19
Active Files Management – Paper Records	3.58
Integrated Technology Applications (microform; optical disk; bar coding, etc.)	3.60
Vital Records Protection and Security	4.08
Records Center Operations – Inactive Records	5.01
Forms Management	6.60
Reports/Correspondence Management	6.80
Archival Management	7.08

the United States and Canada. Most of the survey respondents were certified records managers, and many were fellows of ARMA International. All had been involved in leadership roles in ARMA and almost all had more than 10 years of experience in records and information management. The major goal of this research study was to determine where informational professionals were placing their current priorities and where they predicted they would be placing their priorities 10 years into the future.

Table 1 reflects the major functions with which records and information management programs were currently involved, and indicates the ranked priorities in managing these areas with a mean score for each. Priority was ranked on a scale of 1 to 9, with 1 being the highest and 9 being the lowest. Thus, the lowest mean scores reflect the highest priorities.

The information professionals surveyed in 1996 were also asked to indicate the current extent of the inclusion of these areas in their own specific records and information management programs. Table 2 shows the percentage of responding companies whose programs reflect the areas listed.

The information professionals surveyed in 1996 were also asked to predict what they believed their priorities would be in 10 years. Table 3 illustrates that their priorities shifted to a stronger emphasis on the areas involved with technology and the computer, but they also showed high interest in retention schedules and vital records protection.

A Mastery of Computer Applications

Information professionals now see the impact of computers on their personal as well as professional lives, and they clearly see the need for the mastery of the applications that relate to the information management area. They also must have a clear perception of the impact for the future. No one can question the

Table 2

Areas Currently Included in Records and Information Management Programs

FUNCTION	MEAN
Records Retention Schedules	85%
Computer Based Information Retrieval	83%
Integrated Technology Applications	81%
Records Center Operations – Inactive Records	80%
Active Files Management – Paper Records	78%
Vital Records Protection and Security	74%
Forms Management	44%
Archival Management	44%
Reports/Correspondence Management	26%

tremendous growth in computer usage since the 1981 introduction by IBM of the PC, which used what was to become an industry-standard operating system (DOS). Now millions of PCs are in use.

In just one application, electronic mail, the growth has been incredible and has created new legality and retention concerns for information managers. According to an article in *Time* magazine (Gwynne and Dickerson 1997), 776 billion e-mail messages moved through U.S. computer networks in 1994; that number was predicted to be 2.6 trillion in 1997 and 6.6 trillion in 2000. Computers are predicted to outsell television sets by the year 2000.

In the 1996 survey, information professionals predicted the most important areas in 2006 would be integrated technology applications and computer-based information retrieval. This ranking reflects the impact that information professionals realize the computer is going to continue to have. Also in this survey, the respondents indicated that 100 percent of their companies were currently using the computer as an information storage medium along with paper (100 percent), microform (86 percent), and optical disk (68 percent).

The final question in the survey asked what the professionals thought

would be the greatest change to take place in the records and information management profession in the next 10 years. Most of the predictions dealt with (1) technology, (2) changes in the role of the records manager because of this technology, and (3) a convergence, or merging, of information disciplines.

Connecting with IT

To be successful now and in the future, records and information professionals must work cooperatively with information technology (IT) professionals. Together these professionals must be able to find solutions to many of the problems created by electronic media. For example, one current concern is the "Y2K" problem, also called the "millennium bug." This problem results from the fact that many computer programs allocate only two digits instead of four to the data field for the year. With the new century, if the software is not modified, systems will recognize 00 as 1900 instead of 2000. Many technology professionals are not sure whether this is only a "temporary nuisance" or a "long-term problem." However, to illustrate the importance of this issue, the World Future Society scheduled a special Y2K conference in December 1998, and some of the top technology professionals in the country were scheduled to speak.

Table 3 Predicted Priorities for Areas of Records and Information Management in 2006

AREA/FUNCTION	MEAN
Integrated Technology Applications (microform; optical disk; bar coding, etc.)	2.42
Computer Based Information Retrieval	2.49
Records Retention Schedules	3.31
Vital Records Protection and Security	3.78
Active Files Management – Paper Records	4.63
Records Center Operations – Inactive Records	5.81
Reports/Correspondence Management	6.72
Forms Management	6.73
Archival Management	7.12

The 1998 Comdex computer trade show attracted more than 200,000 people; an entire pavilion was devoted to companies offering Y2K solutions.

Bill Gates, whom *Time* magazine recently named as one of the 20 most influential business geniuses of this century, provided a fascinating look into the future of computing in his book *The Road Ahead* (1995). "Now that computing is astoundingly inexpensive and computers inhabit every part of our lives," he wrote, "we stand at the brink of another revolution. This one will involve unprecedentedly inexpensive communication; all the computers will join together to communicate with us and for us. Interconnected globally, they will form a network, which is being called the information highway."

(Harry S. Dent wrote in his book *The Roaring 2000s* (1998) that "the Internet is to the coming economic boom of the Roaring 2,000's what the moving assembly line was to the Roaring Twenties.")

"As communications technology goes digital," Gates added, "it becomes subject to the same exponential improvements that have made today's \$2,000 laptop computer more powerful than a \$10 million IBM mainframe computer of 20 years ago."

A Commitment to Ethics

Great concerns have been expressed about the status of ethical behavior in our society. Newspaper articles about problems with unethical or illegal activities in business appear daily. White-collar crime costs billions of dollar a year, and everyone pays – however indirectly. A recent survey reported in *The Los Angeles Times* (Dart 1993) indicated that only 20 percent of a representative sample of U.S. adults rated the honesty and ethical standards of business executives as "very high" or "high." Even the clergy had dropped from 67 percent in a 1985 poll to 53 percent in this 1993 poll.

In a 1987 Touche-Ross survey of key business leaders about ethical standards and behavior, 94 percent said the business community is troubled by ethical problems, and a clear majority of the respondents (63 percent) believed that a business enterprise actually strengthens its competitive position by maintaining high ethical standards.

In recognition of the importance of such research data, the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business requires accredited business programs to cover ethical issues. This echoes the philosophy that John Dalla Costa presented in his new book *The Ethical Imperative: Why*

Moral Leadership Is Good Business. "Ethics are 'radically essential,'" submitted Costa. "They are not a new skill but a profound new sensibility that changes everything. And they are not optional."

Records and information managers must maintain the highest of ethical standards and they must be on guard against those who might not adhere to this philosophy. ARMA International has a Code of Professional Responsibility (<http://www.arma.org>), and the Institute for Certified Records Managers has a Code of Ethics. Information professionals are expected to adhere to these codes.

Striving for Professionalism

Any information manager should subscribe to the highest level of professionalism, and membership in ARMA as well as other professional organizations is a major step toward that level. Some of the other organizations have been mentioned earlier, including AIIM, SAA, ASIS, NIRMA, NAGARA, and AHIMA. Further, a true professional does not merely join an organization but takes an active part by becoming an officer or a committee member.

Another goal of any information professional should be to achieve certification by the Institute of Certified Records Managers (ICRM). Founded in 1975, ICRM has certified more than 600 records and information professionals worldwide. Candidates for certification must have appropriate education and experience and must pass a challenging six-part examination. In order to maintain certification, certified records managers must demonstrate continuing education or other contributions to the field.

Avenues for Education

How does an information professional acquire the knowledge needed in all these areas? College and university courses are recommended, but a variety of other approaches are also possible, including autodidactic

methods (self-teaching); conferences and seminars; and work experience.

Throughout the United States and Canada, the number of schools offering courses and programs has grown significantly during the past 30 years. In a 1967 study, 63 schools offered courses in records management (Bennett 1968). According to the ARMA International 1996-97 *Directory of Collegiate Schools*, 161 schools were offering courses. Also, ARMA committees have designed three model programs for degrees in records and information management: a two-year program, a four-year bachelor's degree program, and a post-graduate program.

Most existing records and information management courses and programs are found in colleges of business and in schools of library and information science. Many of these programs provide practicum or internship experiences in addition to classroom instruction.

Information professionals can also teach themselves with the help of a wide variety of resources. ARMA International, for example, offers a home-study course. The 1996-97 *ARMA Directory of Collegiate Schools* listed two additional correspondence courses: one at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind., and the other at Chadron State College in Chadron, Neb. Studying for the certified records manager (CRM) test is also an excellent individualized program of study.

Increasingly, courses are becoming available – on an international basis – via various forms of Distance Education. Courses offered via the World Wide Web, for example, are being offered by universities around the world to new constituencies and in larger numbers than they had ever dreamed of reaching in the more traditional mode.

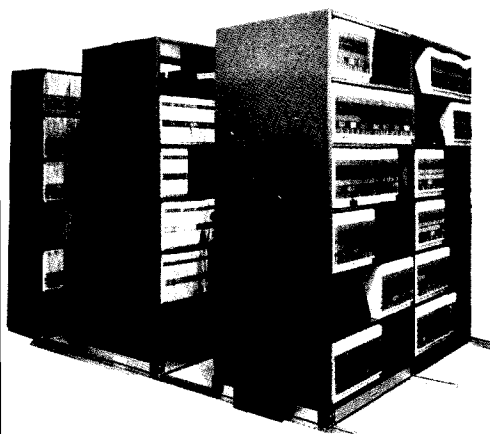
Local ARMA chapters, as well as ARMA International, offer a wide

range of educational programs. Excellent opportunities are also afforded at the national conferences of ARMA as well as the national conferences of related organizations such as the Association of Information and Image Management (AIIM), the Society of American Archivists (SAA), the American Society for Information Sciences (ASIS), the Nuclear Information and Records Management Association (NIRMA), the National Association of Government Archivists and Records Administrators (NAGARA), and the American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA).

On-the-job experience is another invaluable source of knowledge. A debate exists about the value of theoretical education obtained in school as opposed to practical work experience obtained on the job. A debate should not be needed – both are important. Students gain excellent experience through internships

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and field study programs. Mentor programs have also been successful; all new professionals in the information field should have a mentor to guide them, and every ARMA member should serve as a mentor to a new practitioner.

A Desire for Life-Long Learning

Information professionals must continually educate themselves, especially in an age of such dramatic and rapid changes. Toffler, in *The Third Wave*, said that "the responsibility for change, therefore, lies with us. We must begin with ourselves, teaching ourselves not to close our minds prematurely to the novel, the surprising, the seemingly radical." Robert Maynard Hutchins, one of this century's leading educators and the president and chancellor of the University of Chicago from 1929 to 1950, once stated that "the object of education is to prepare the young to

educate themselves throughout their lives."

The greatest gift that educators could give their students is to help them "learn how to learn." Information professionals need this gift for they must never stop learning in order to achieve excellence and to meet the future challenges of management in the knowledge age. The varied publications referenced in this article can provide a current reading list that may be one step forward in this life-long learning process.

Achieving the qualifications discussed here should enable any information professional to reach a level of excellence so that the challenges of the new century may be encountered with excitement as well as confidence. With these qualifications, any manager will recognize records, information, and knowledge as corporate assets and will be able to manage these assets effectively to help achieve organizational success. ■

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