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ARTICLE

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) official e-mail system

An example of records management

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Abstract

Purpose – To share the experience of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)'s approach to managing its records, using an e-mail system.

Design/methodology/approach – The primary importance of communication between the headquarters and delegations of a global organization such as the ICRC lead it to use its e-mail system to manage its "official" current records. The Lotus Notes system applies best practice principles of records management as defined in the ISO 15489 standard.

Findings – After almost a decade of operation the e-mail system meets the requirements of managing official current electronic records, however, advice sought from an independent expert highlighted the lack of integration of other records, such as word documents, would cause problems in the future.

Practical implications – The e-mail records management system is to be modified to cover both the official institutional records and the administrative documents.

Originality/value – This paper is a useful case study showing how a global organization with software solution constraints has successfully used a global e-mail system, based on widely used groupware product, to manage its official records.

Keywords International standards, Records management, Communication technologies

Paper type Case study

Introduction

From an IT point of view, the records management system of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC, www.icrc.com) is simple, with no great degree of sophistication. The organizational aspects, however, are somewhat unique judging by the reactions of visitors and consultants who have learned about our approach to the management of messages. At the ICRC, e-mail messages are treated as records. Indeed, they form the core of its records management system, for reasons that are explained in the paper.

This paper is divided into three parts. It begins with an introduction to the ICRC, its mission and its activities around the world. The main part discusses the organization's experience with the management of current records covering the basic aspects of what

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is called the "messagerie professionnelle" or official e-mail system, along with the main procedures and training and monitoring activities. The third and final part outlines the lessons the ICRC has learned from its experience along with its plans for the future.

The ICRC and its mission

The ICRC is "an independent, neutral organisation ensuring humanitarian protection and assistance for victims of war and armed violence" which grew from "one man's spontaneous gesture to help wounded soldiers" to what it is today nearly 150 years later (www.icrc.org).

Through the Geneva Conventions, the community of nations has mandated it to:

- protect and assist the victims of armed conflict throughout the world, both military and civilian;
- promote the Geneva Conventions and other instruments of International Humanitarian Law; and
- coordinate the action of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in countries affected by conflict (www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/section_mandate?OpenDocument)

Four examples of ICRC work that illustrate its mandate are:

(1) Visiting security detainees. The aims of these visits are to prevent disappearances and ill-treatment, to re-establish contact between detainees and their families and to improve conditions of detention.

(2) Organizing the Red Cross message system. Red Cross messages replace the normal postal system when it ceases to operate between parties to a conflict.

(3) Distributing water to the civilian population. This is one of a range of ICRC activities in the areas of water and habitat, economic security and health services (war surgery, artificial limbs, prison health, etc.).

(4) Training armed forces in International Humanitarian Law. This activity comes under the heading of "prevention."

The ICRC is based in Geneva and has delegations in 80 countries, many of which are experiencing war or internal conflict. In 2004, the ICRC had over 13,000 staff, at some 150 locations. Communication between Geneva and the delegations is of primary importance (www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/section_discover_the_icrc?OpenDocument).

The ICRC has, therefore, based its records management system on its e-mail system. Other organizations base their records management system on their documents. This is the case, for instance, of many UN agencies, whose main function is to organize conferences and the work of preparatory committees.

The e-mail records management system

The outline of the official e-mail system (so called to distinguish it from the completely separate e-mail system for exchanging informal messages at headquarters and between headquarters and non-ICRC correspondents) was defined in 1995 by the operations department, the archives division and the information systems division.

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The Department of Operations is responsible for ICRC's field operations, which means it is in charge of all the delegations. By the same token it is also the main customer – what one might call the main business owner – of the official e-mail system. The archives and information systems divisions have prime responsibility for designing and maintaining the official e-mail system.

By 1997, the system was operational. The ICRC chose to use Lotus Notes (Lotus software, www.lotus.com), developing a bespoke Notes application to cover its official e-mail needs.

Lotus Notes measured up well to the requirements identified in 1995. The purpose of the official e-mail system was to:

- allow reliable asynchronous communication between Geneva and ICRC sites around the world;
- support work in groups (a "groupware" approach). In practical terms, this means that all the members of a given team share a single mailbox. Messages are managed collectively by the group;
- manage messages in accordance with the principles of records management. The key concepts of a "record" (i.e. a formal document to be managed and preserved), of a "file" "filing plan",, etc. therefore, had to be integrated into the e-mail system;
- ensure the continuity of operations and the creation of a corporate memory; and
- be capable of being set up in exactly the same manner at all ICRC sites.

Naturally, the system had to be flexible and easy to manage – there was no question of sending an information systems/records management specialist to all 150 sites. Some organizations set up centralized records management systems and, while these systems do, in some cases, allow for more advanced records management, they continue to pose organizational and financial problems in the case of large-scale, worldwide implementation of the kind needed by the ICRC.

Records management procedures within the system

The official e-mail system applies the principal records management procedures of the ISO 15489-1 (2001) records management standard. Only five of the seven records processes and controls are covered, as neither access nor tracking are dealt with here.

Consider the example of a message sent by an ICRC delegation to headquarters, shown in Figure 1 as Site A (ICRC delegation) sending a message to Site B (ICRC headquarters). An important feature of the ICRC is that it is the sender at Site A who decides whether to give their message the status of "institutional" or "administrative" although the recipient can change the status of the message if necessary. The distinction is based on the nature of the work being undertaken. If the message deals with activities directly related to the ICRC's mandate of protecting and assisting the victims of war, it is given the status of "institutional." Messages concerning support activities – e.g. financial management, logistics, human resources, etc. – are classed as "administrative." This circuit reflects a long-standing tradition regarding the organization of mail within the ICRC, viz. a central registry that registers and classifies official correspondence on the one hand, and the support services that manage their correspondence and files independently on the other.

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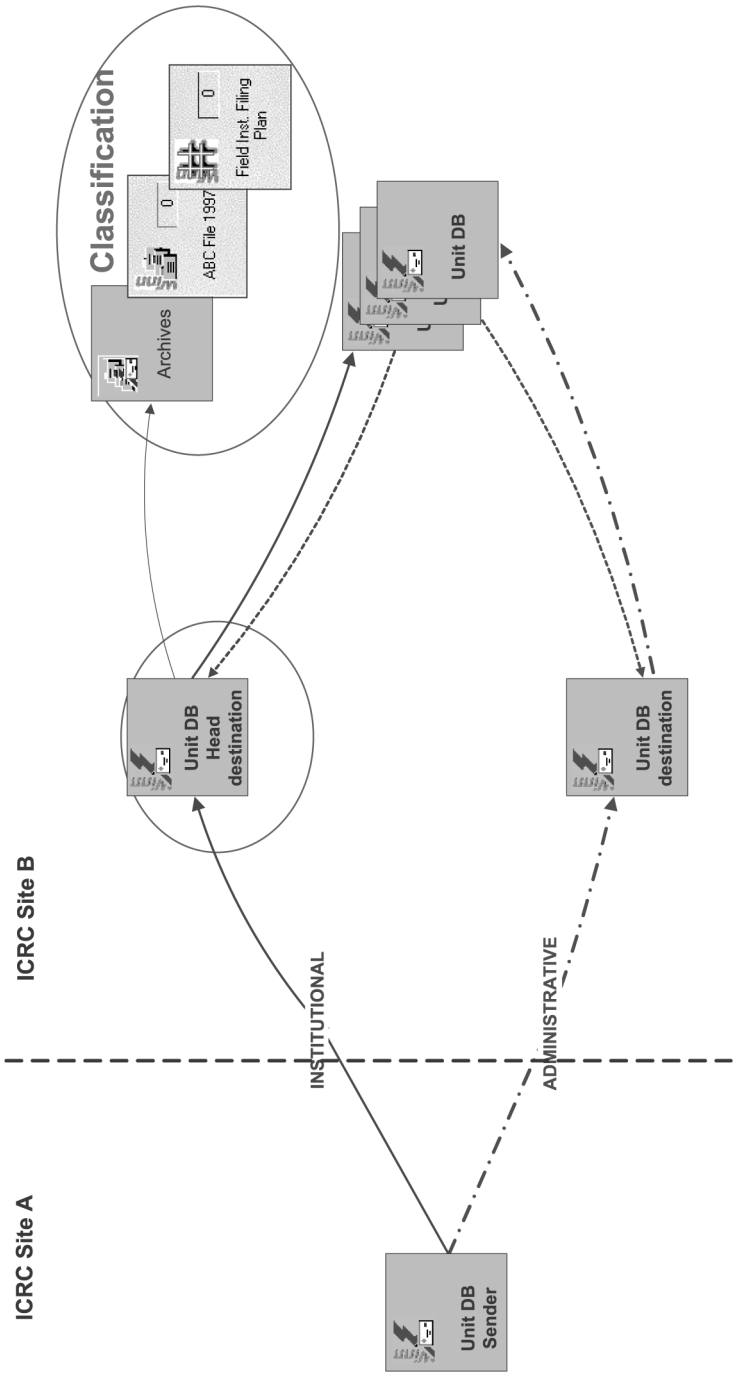

Figure 1.
Procedures followed within the official e-mail system

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The messages arrive in the unit e-mail databases of the units at Site B, from where they are distributed. The circuit of messages exchanged between the groups is structured. This circuit controls the approval and distribution of the ICRC's correspondence. The distribution of a message triggers the process of classification, involving three databases. This point is returned to later. Let us first examine the capture and registration process.

Capture and registration

Each message has a standardized header, containing metadata related to the content. When a unit receives and distributes the message, it is automatically captured and registered in electronic form (Figure 2).

Paper correspondence and other paper documents undergo the same procedure. The document is indexed on receipt.

Classification

When an institutional message is distributed, it is automatically sent to the archive database for indexing. This is one of the main differences between the ICRC system and others, in which it is the user who decides whether to send the document to a database for classification. Administrative messages are not indexed in this system (Figure 3).

The indexing of institutional messages is controlled by a directory of current files. These files are held in the files database which, in turn, is controlled by the filing plan database. The filing plan stipulates the manner in which the ICRC's "institutional" (i.e. non-administrative) activities are to be classified. Each delegation has these three classification-related databases, as does headquarters.

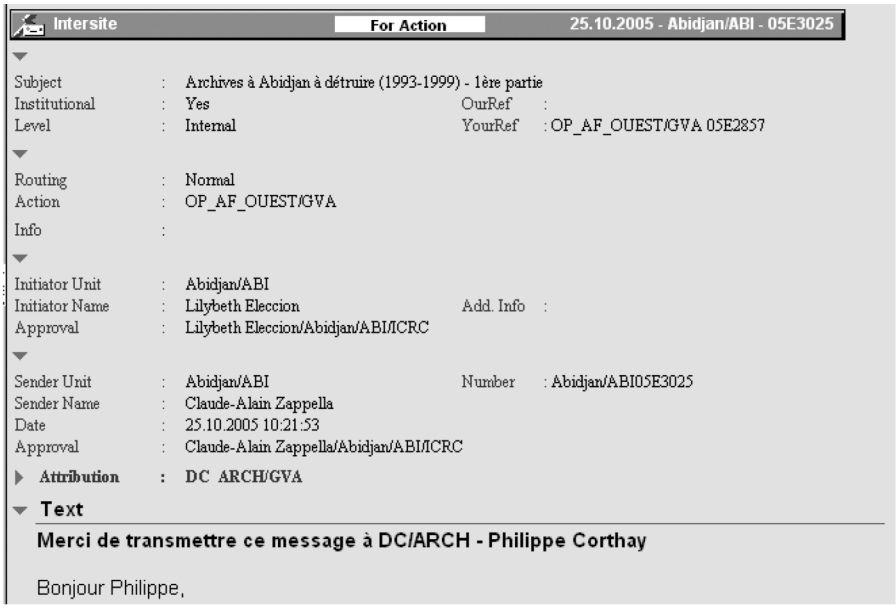

Figure 2.
Record capture and registration

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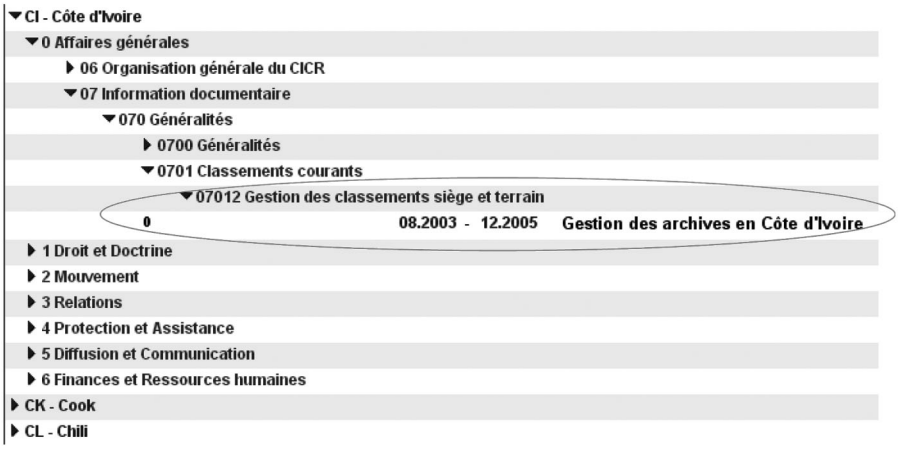

Figure 3.
Classification

Messages can only be filed in files that have been created in accordance with the structure dictated by the filing plan. This obviously reduces the scope for classification errors. If classification errors do occur, they are related to the difficulty of understanding about what activity a given message is reporting. (Some messages are so short and without context information that it is difficult to file them properly).

The indexing of institutional messages is carried out by classification specialists. They are the only users who can index messages in the archive database. Only one type of indexing is used – the reference or classification number of the filing plan (in French "cote de classement") – for example, 070.12 0 as shown in Figure 4. However, a record can have more than one reference number, i.e. be filed in more than one file. The added value lies in the structuring of the files and in the precision of the file title.

Storage and disposition

A folder is printed using the data from the files database. Once they have been indexed, the messages are printed and filed as hard copy, along with such documents as paper correspondence, faxes, documents printed out from office applications, etc.

How long the paper files are kept depends on the requirements set out in the ICRC records retention schedule. The e-mail system does not enforce the retention schedule. Until 2003, e-mails were deleted once they had been filed in paper form. Since, 2004, they have been retained in a database.

Training and monitoring

Staff turnover is high in ICRC delegations. This makes training in the use of the official e-mail system, a continuous requirement. Training and supervision are carried out by the archivists and information management assistants. New recruits undergo just two hours of instruction in records management, and many do not even receive this very basic training.

To compensate for the resulting knowledge deficit, information management assistants pay regular visits to ICRC sites. The assistants are based in each of the seven regions into which the ICRC divides its activities, and their tasks include training

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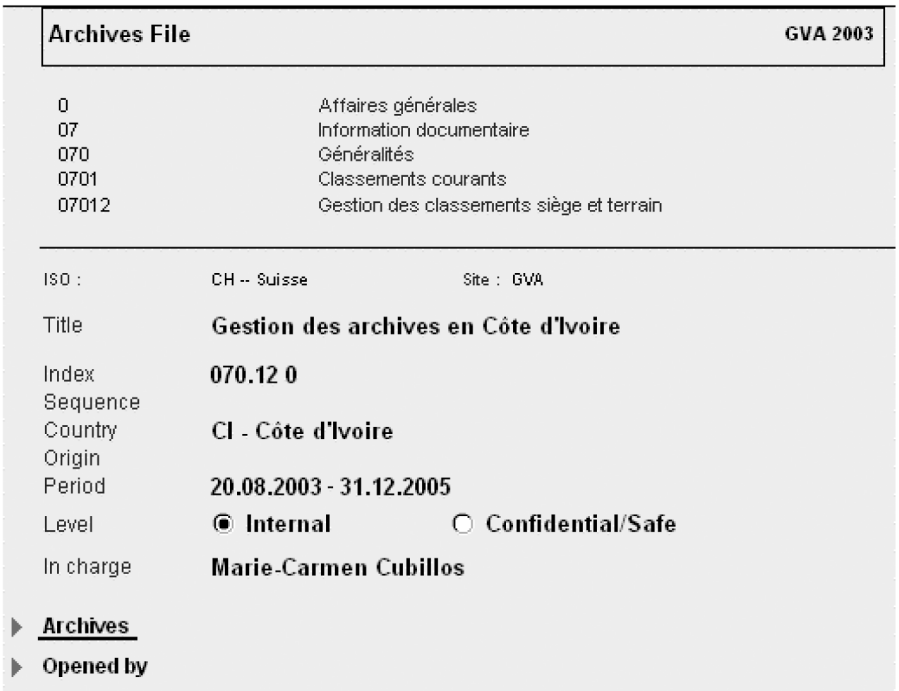

Figure 4.
Storage and implementation of disposition

new staff in the use of the official e-mail system. Training covers document creation and routing, access to information and the management of current and intermediate files. They are also responsible for monitoring compliance with the rules governing the official e-mail system.

Two Geneva-based archivists are available to advise personnel in the delegations with responsibility for classifying records. Each delegation's files database is copied to Geneva once a week using the Lotus Notes "replication" feature, giving the archivists in Geneva access to the delegation classification directories.

The archivists also monitor transfers of intermediate archives and their destruction by delegations. Both transfer and destruction require the approval of the archives division.

Lessons learned and future plans

After nine years, we can say that the official e-mail system is viable and that it has met the ICRC's requirements. Between 1997 and 2005, a total of 120,000 files were created. In 2004, 5,000 ICRC employees at 150 sites around the world were using the system every day, and 400,000 messages were exchanged during that year between the headquarters and its correspondents (ICRC and external). The system has been migrated successfully three times, without the need for expensive updates or corrections.

In 2001, Professor Carol Couture, Director of the *École de Bibliothéconomie et des Sciences de l'Information (EBSI)* at Montreal University, was asked to help the ICRC draw conclusions about the management of its current records. His conclusions were

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that the way messages were being managed in electronic form met records management requirements. However, the fact that other documents – correspondence, word documents, etc. – were not integrated into an electronic records management system was going to create increasingly serious problems. He, therefore, recommended that the official e-mail system be retained, while introducing a full electronic classification system that would capture all records, regardless of their original medium.

In 2004, the ICRC decided to review its official e-mail system. A survey of users and an analysis of needs led to a decision to retain and develop the system.

The ICRC intends to modify the system as follows:

- With regard to capture and registration procedures, we wish to include both records and "non-records" will be included within a single interface. In other words, the aim is to use a single tool to create both formal documents, which will be managed and preserved, and informal documents which will not. The users will decide the status of each document. The designation "institutional" or "administrative" will be applied at file level, rather than document level. All records will be registered in electronic form.
- A complete electronic classification system will be introduced. Files will contain all documents on a given topic, in electronic form. A single filing plan covering all the activities of the ICRC will be created. One important new feature is that the filing plan will include the ICRC's administrative activities.
- In relation to storage and implementation of disposition, the ICRC currently does not carry out any form of electronic archival. Initially, therefore, the intention is to meet conservation requirements in three ways:
  (1) mixed electronic/hard copy system during the transition period;
  (2) preservation of electronic files for five to ten years; and
  (3) new technologies that could allow the storage of records for long-term preservation, for instance microform, will be explored.

The intention is for the destruction of electronic records to be semi-automatic, under a records retention schedule integral to the system.

- *Training and monitoring*. The developments outlined here will involve significant organizational changes. For instance, classification tools will no longer be the preserve of professionals. They will be shared by all ICRC staff, which means that rules will need to be established. The plan is to have four roles:
  (1) user – able to classify the documents for which they are responsible;
  (2) group records manager – organizes the files of their unit and monitors the classification of documents;
  (3) site record manager – organizes the distribution of files among the different units at their site and supervises the management of files by those units; and
  (4) archivist – responsible for maintenance of the filing plan and for overall supervision of classification.

Implementation of these changes will have to be backed up by a thorough training plan. The ICRC has yet to select the technology solution.

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About the author

Georges Willemin has been Head of the Archives of the ICRC, Geneva, Switzerland since 1987. The Archives manages records from creation and capture to final archiving or disposal. Prior to this position Georges served as an ICRC delegate in Africa, Middle East and South-East Asia. He gave a presentation on the ICRC Archives at 37th International Conference of the Round Table on Archives (CITRA) on "Archives and Human Rights" in Cape Town, 2003 (*Comma 2002-2004*). He is Vice President of the Association of Swiss Archivists: www.vsa-aas.org/

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