



Information culture and records management: a suitable match? Conceptualizations of information culture and their application on records management



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ABSTRACT

Good information and records management is assumed to promote organizational efficiency. Despite established management regimes and available technology, many organizations still consider information and records management challenging. The reason may be cultural factors. This study based on a literature review, aims to explore the academic discourse on information culture and to discuss its relevance for records management. The findings show that the concept information culture is used in various ways: as an explanatory framework; as an analytical and evaluative tool; or as normative standard. The research on information culture addresses several areas: business performance, systems implementation, the manifestation of information culture in different organizations, and a few concerns records management practices. The research settings and the objects of study varied, why general conclusions are difficult to draw, but often a positive correlation between culture and performance is assumed. The focus has been on how information is used, shared and disseminated, while the production and management, that is the vital object of records management, has with few exceptions been neglected. If information culture should fully function as an analytical framework concerning records management, a widened and more inclusive conceptualization is required, which also will enrich information culture as a theoretical concept.

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1. Introduction

Good information management and records management practices are assumed to promote organizational efficiency (Feldman & Villars, 2006). They are of crucial importance to ensure transparency and accountability in public organizations and key to e-government development (e.g. Jaeger & Thompson, 2003; Worall, 2010). These circumstances are now widely recognized and the drivers behind development of standards, models, best practices and other tools for achieving efficient and trustworthy records management regimes. Both private enterprises and public agencies have heavily invested in technological systems, and many countries have imposed stricter legislative demands in order to enhance the management of records. However, despite investments in technology and legal frameworks that governs the management of

information resources, many organizations still grapple with the implementation of good information and records management practices. A lot of knowledge has been produced within the records management community that should by now, with all the technical advancements present, mitigate these problems, but attaining good information and records management is still a challenge in most organizations. Apparently, there must be other, less tangible, factors that impact on information and records management. Research has also proven that concerning records management, people issues had large impact, and those concern culture and philosophical attitudes. Research has also proven that *people issues* have large impact on records management, and those issues concern cultural and philosophical attitudes (McLeod, Childs, & Hardiman, 2011).

A theoretical construct used to address the role of norms, attitudes and the way organizations value information is *information culture*. Information is, however, a polysemic and fluid concept, and its relationship to the concept of records is not undisputed. Culture is also an elusive concept. To be operational, a concept has to be defined in order to get to a definite understanding of what it constitutes. This study aims to explore the academic discourse

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on information culture in order to elicit the different meanings attached to the concept, and to discuss its relevance for records management by addressing the following questions:

- What are the objects of studies of information culture?
- In what sense is the concept *information* used in the studies?
- How is *information culture* conceptualized?
- What is the presumed impact of information culture on organizations and information practices?
- How can information culture apply to records management as an analytical framework?

The article presents an introduction that gives a short background of the subject, a method which describes the techniques applied during the research process, an overview of contemporary information science research on information culture, an analysis and discussion which synthesizes the salient elements in the literature review and a conclusion.

2. Method

The study is conducted as an interpretative analysis of conceptualizations of information culture and its relation to information management and records management, based on a survey of research literature. A search was done by the authors in data bases like Google Scholar, Emerald, Science Direct, and Libris to identify the relevant literature. Using search terms such as culture, information culture, information management and records management, a set of scholarly articles and books were identified. Through the search a lot of articles focusing on organizational culture and information technology were identified but rather few discussed information culture as such. The final selection of the literature focused on articles explicitly dealing with the theme, and the analysis guided by the research questions stated above.

3. Research on information culture

The concept of information culture has its roots in organizational studies and the concept of *organizational culture* established by Schein (1985, 1990) in the 1980s, who defined organizational culture as “(a) a pattern of basic assumptions, (b) invented, discovered, or developed by a given group, (c) as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, (d) that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore (e) is to be taught to new members as the (f) correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (Schein, 1990, p. 111). Hofstede (2001) stated that an anthropologically agreed on definition of culture is, “[c]ulture consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 9, citing Kluckhohn, 1951). Alvesson (2002) defined culture as the setting in which behaviour, social events, institutions and process take place and are understood, but claimed that there is an enormous variation in the definition of the term organizational culture and that he used it “as an umbrella concept for a way of thinking which takes a serious interest in cultural and symbolic phenomena” (Alvesson, 2002, p. 3).

The concept has then been adopted and appropriated by information science researchers, with various, more or less explicit definitions. A pioneer in this field was Ginman (1987, 1988) who mouthed the concept information culture in her studies of how information and its handling impacted on business performance,

however without explicitly defining the concept. In her point of view, the information culture was the setting where “the transformation of intellectual resources is maintained alongside the transformation of material resources. The primary resources for this type of transformation are varying kinds of knowledge and information. The output achieved is a processed intellectual product which is necessary for the material activities to function and develop positively” (Ginman, 1988, p. 93). In her analysis information was categorized as external or internal, written or oral. The meaning of the concept could be derived from her description of chief executive officers’ approaches to information as consisting of the following variables (Ginman, 1987, p. 9):

- Use of internal and external information;
- Use of oral and written information;
- Quantity of information used and attitudes towards it.

According to Ginman, information culture could thus be seen as individuals’ information behaviour, shaped by the organizational climate, that is, culture. Her work formed the basis for a later study by (Owens et al., 1995), investigating the role of information systems and services in high-performing enterprises. Neither here was the information culture concept further elaborated, but it was used as an a priori term, manifested in the companies’ use of information technology, their knowledge base, sensitivity to the value of information, and information ethos, that is if the value of information was acknowledged by the employees. Owen et al.’s view of information was similar to Ginman’s. Information was considered as internal or external, and constituted something that could be delivered through information systems or services, or as personal knowledge.

In 1995 an empirical study was carried out in collaboration with the British Library Research and Development Department to determine whether there was a correlation between information culture and business success (Grimshaw, 1995). According to the literature review that was conducted during this study, it was confirmed that it is the human information activities which give organizations a competitive edge. Based on the literature review it was confirmed that the quality and value of information, its sources, management and communication were critical to the success of an organization. It was argued in the study that an organization’s culture embraces those characteristics that are to be encouraged and that organizational culture has two levels. The first level reflects shared values and the second level is about group behaviour norms. The first level for example places value on money, innovation or the employees’ well-being while the second level represents the behaviour patterns or style of an organization that is, the way people in it interact or dress. Grimshaw (1995) further posited that human resources were key elements to the organization and its culture and that if organizations were to maximize their use, information flow and communication had to be well organized. It was further confirmed in the report that information culture is part of corporate culture and it is influenced by information.

Höglund (1998) reported on a case study of a pharmaceutical company researching the correlation between information culture, organizational climate, information service quality, and performance. He argued that even though literature on organizational culture was growing, there was little use of the concept information culture. He defined information culture as part of corporate culture, concerning the valuation of information and information services, and concluded that a corporate culture that emphasizes information issues and an open communication climate, is related to positive company performance. Information was considered as *something that could be provided* through formal information services, as a company library, or through personal communication.

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