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DIFFERENT STROKES FOR DIFFERENT FOLKS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF APPRAISAL PERFORMED BY RECORDKEEPING EXPERTS AND NON-EXPERTS IN THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA (PAPER)

Abstract:

This research examines the appraisal practices of recordkeeping experts and non-experts in the Government of Canada. The study uses interviews, cognitive inquiries, and document analysis to investigate the strategies and criteria each group uses to appraise records with a focus on the similarities and differences.

Résumé:

Cette recherche examine les pratiques d'évaluation archivistique des experts et des non-experts au gouvernement du Canada. L'étude utilise des entrevues semi-structurées, des enquêtes cognitives et l'analyse de documents pour étudier les stratégies et les critères que chaque groupe utilise pour évaluer les documents d'archives en mettant l'accent sur les similitudes et les différences.

1. Introduction

In its most general sense, the term "appraisal" describes any process that evaluates an information resource. The analysis and identification of access and security requirements, preservation criteria, resource discovery approaches, and use are all acts of appraisal (Bailey, 2008, p. 90). Luciana Duranti defines archival appraisal as "the process of establishing the value of documents made or received in the course of the conduct of affairs, qualifying that value, and determining its duration" (1994, p. 329). This is the definition used to understand the meaning of appraisal throughout this study.

2. Context

In June 2009, the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (TBS) released the *Directive on Recordkeeping*. The *Directive* holds governmental institutions responsible for identifying information of "business value" and ensuring that these valuable information assets are managed appropriately (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2009). Although archivists from Library and Archives Canada were traditionally responsible for appraising the value of documents with

the aim to preserve information of societal significance at the end of the lifecycle (e.g. Boles & Young, 1985; Cox, 2002; Eastwood, 1993; Schellenberg, 1956), increased involvement from recordkeeping experts and records users of each federal institution became critical to deal with the volume, variety and speed of digital information that is created and received daily "in support of programs, services and ongoing operations" (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2009).

Two official Electronic Document and Records Management Systems (EDRMS) have been implemented in the Government of Canada since 2004. These systems are based on a conceptual approach where digital information resources are saved in a virtual folder structure. The folder structure represents the business classification and is associated with retention and access rules. With the EDRMS approach, governmental employees are expected to decide whether an information resource has business value or not in order to classify it manually against the business classification scheme (Lappin, 2010, p. 253).

Unfortunately, the transfer of the recordkeeping responsibilities from the expert archivists to individual employees who are generally unskilled in records management practices has resulted in many challenges. A report from the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration concludes that depending on busy employees who are focused on achieving their organization's mission leads to inconsistent recordkeeping across the government (National Archives and Records Administration, 2014, p. 5). These conclusions are reflected in different studies that address the lack of employee motivation with respect to tasks related to the appraisal and classification of records (Bailey, 2008; Goldschmidt, Joseph, & Debowski, 2012; Jordan & de Stricker, 2013; Mäkinen & Henttonen, 2011; McKemmish & Piggott, 2013). There is therefore a need to better understand appraisal practices so that a more effective and scalable solution can be developed to support appraisal tasks.

3. Research Design

This paper presents an exploratory study that examines how recordkeeping experts and non-experts appraise the value of information resources in the Government of Canada. It uses a segment of the InterPARES Appraisal Task Force's model of the selection function (see figure 1) as a conceptual framework to examine appraisal practices (Eastwood et al., 2001a, 2001b). The results focus on the strategies and criteria used by recordkeeping experts and non-experts, the similarities and differences of appraisal practices between the two groups, and how the different groups work together to appraise information resources. The data are collected in the context of a broader research project aiming at automating the classification tasks and are expected to provide a core model of appraisal strategies and criteria to design the automation experiments.

Recordkeeping experts refer to governmental employees who have specialized knowledge of appraisal theory and practices. Examples of recordkeeping experts include records managers, information management specialists, and archivists. Non-experts refer to governmental employees with no specialized knowledge of appraisal theory or practices. In other words, non-experts refer to government employees whose primary work objective is not related to managing information under the custody of the Government of Canada.

The research methodology involves a qualitative study of appraisal processes of five recordkeeping experts and five non-experts. The study uses semi-structured interviewing, cognitive inquiries, and document analysis to study these appraisal practices. Semi-structured interviews are conducted to examine the practices adopted by recordkeeping experts and non-experts when appraising records. In the interviews, participants address questions regarding the criteria and strategies they use to appraise information resources. Cognitive inquiries, which consist of a lighter version of verbal protocol analysis (Ericsson & Simon, 1993), gain further cognitive insights on the governmental employees' appraisal decisions. The cognitive inquiries involve the participants appraising a sample of their own information resources in their work environments for a period of approximately thirty minutes. During this experiment, the participants think aloud and verbalize their decisions while classifying their records according to different categories (such as, 'business value', 'social value', 'no value', etc.). The interview and cognitive inquiry data are analyzed following an interpretative content analysis approach (Miles & Huberman, 2003). A document analysis examines Library and Archives Canada's Generic Valuation Tools (GVT). The GVT provide recommendations to Government of Canada institutions on the identification of information resources of business value and retention periods for common business activities performed in the Government of Canada (Library and Archives Canada, 2015).

4. Findings

The research will contribute to the advancement of knowledge related to the appraisal practices used by recordkeeping experts and non-experts in the Canadian government. The results will focus on the strategies and criteria used by recordkeeping experts and non-experts, the similarities and differences of appraisal practices between these groups, and how the groups work together to appraise information resources. First, the results of this research will contribute towards the development of an appraisal model. This appraisal model will be used to support the determination of criteria, value categories, and associated features to appraise information resources.

The model will further be used in a second phase of the broader research study to conduct automatic classification experiments. The automatic classification experiments are expected to demonstrate the validity and feasibility of using automated tools to support organizations to make better appraisal decisions. Statistical experiments based on natural language processing and machine learning techniques will be developed to automatically classify emails according to the collaborative appraisal model and the requirements developed during the first phase. Despite the contextual nature of appraisal, the approach to develop an appraisal model is expected to be transferable to different organizational contexts and genres of records.

5. Conclusion

Automatic classification solutions are expected to reduce the burden on the end users and result in more reliable and scalable appraisal practices to deal with the increasing volume of digital information. For the Canadian government, leveraging technologies to support recordkeeping tasks will enable institutions to better meet their objectives of operational efficiency, transparency and accountability.

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Figure

Figure 1. A function model of the selection of electronic objects, released by the InterPARES Appraisal Task Force in 2001 (emphasis added).