

Electronic amnesia?

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Is the 90s a decade that will stand out as the one where corporate Australia lost its memory? Computers are being used to gather and process information in ways that have enabled companies to survive lean times and target new markets where old ones have dried up. Staff numbers have declined and there is even more pressure to get products to market before competitors.

In the mad scramble to re-engineer and 'do more with less' few have given thought to how the computers are being used to capture the evidence of business commitments and business processes. What is happening to our corporate memory? Where is the day-to-day accountability?

With the prolific use of personal computers many public servants and business employees feel that they own the information that is held on their computer and that it is somebody else's responsibility to maintain a record. Even if appropriate records are created, can they be found and will changes in technology make it difficult or impossible to access them, even after a very short period of time? If the record resides on someone's personal computer can anybody else get access to it or does anyone else even know about it?

The Australian Archives is seeking to turn around poor records creation and recordkeeping practices in the Commonwealth government by developing documentation standards that will provide a benchmark by which to measure corporate performance and provide strategies and guidance in how to re-establish good recordkeeping.

The results of initial research in this area were circulated to Commonwealth departments and agencies in September 1995. The paper *A report on the development of a documentation standard for Commonwealth Agencies* set out basic principles and requirements to create, identify, describe, manage records, and provide access to them.

Some of the concepts were lifted from the dry pages of the formal report and presented in a way that is both eye catching and informative — the *Keep a record* poster depicts a red charging elephant with the message *Keep a record*.

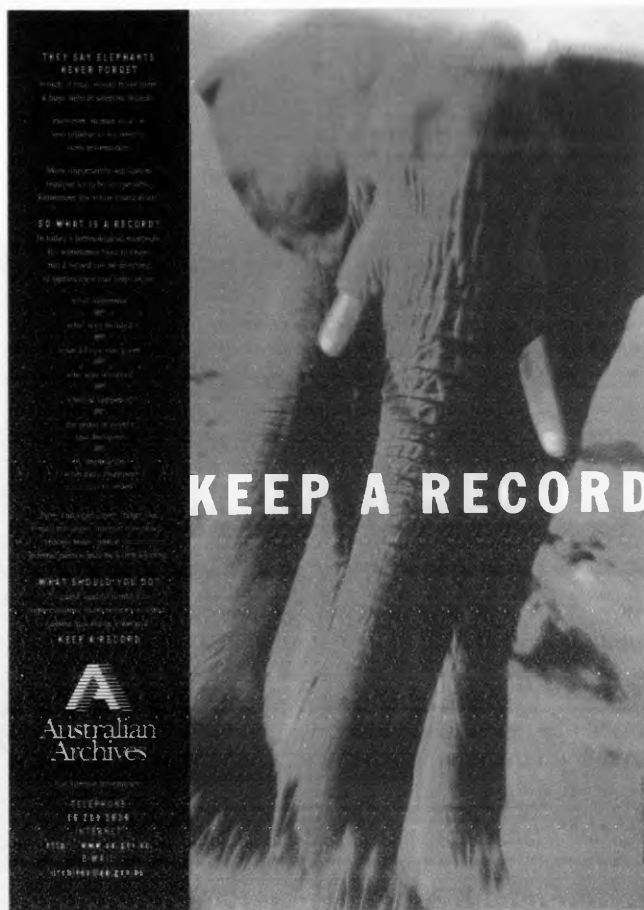
Copies of the poster have been sent to Commonwealth agencies and departments with the intent that they be displayed in general staff areas such as those near photocopiers and shredders.

Some of the themes addressed by the documentation standards have also been taken up in the recent Standards Australia *Records management standard AS4390* series, and the Australian Council of Archives' *Corporate memory in the electronic age: Statement of a common position of electronic recordkeeping* both of which were developed with involvement of Australian Archives' staff.

One of the main 'discoveries' of the documentation standards work has been that the principles which have been applied to recordkeeping in the traditional paper environment are equally applicable, and should be applied, in the electronic environment. There is a lot of commonality between documentation standards, and policy and principles for electronic recordkeeping.

Standard setting is one of the major areas of interest in the current review of the Commonwealth archives legislation. The vision is that the archives of today should have a leading role in standard setting and the evaluation of performance of recordkeeping. By supporting the development of sound systems and procedures for record-keeping, Archives can ensure that adequate records are created and are accessible.

The Australian Archives is looking to establish a set of recordkeeping principles that will guide Commonwealth agencies in their record-keeping practices and in the development and selection of appropriate systems for record-keeping.



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