

PARBICA Toolkit Session: The Fijian Perspective

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The PARBICA Recordkeeping Toolkit has enabled the National Archives of Fiji (NAF) to make solid gains in putting recordkeeping on governments agenda. This brief paper looks at the circumstance which gave rise to the Toolkit, and explores lessons learnt from Fiji's experience with it.

Pacific Need

The PARBICA Recordkeeping Toolkit is an initiative borne out of the great need that exists in the South Pacific for accessible, relevant recordkeeping resources. Unfortunately, the South Pacific Region is not a very friendly environment for recordkeepers. There are issues which hamper overall development, which in turn has a direct bearing on recordkeeping, and then there are concerns which are specific to recordkeeping which continue to hamper and undermine Pacific records professionals.

Primarily, the biggest problem for Pacific recordkeepers is the low level of awareness of the value of records in modern society. Records are not recognized as strategic assets, and recordkeeping is not usually reflected in national development plans. This unawareness is also reflected in the assigning of recordkeeping responsibilities to very junior officers, who often take on a records role in addition to another primary role. Under these circumstances it is entirely understandable that such officers eagerly look for opportunities in other fields. The absence of a career path, poor working conditions, and severe under-resourcing results in extremely high staff turnover, which means that national archives and other recordkeeping bodies are not able to see the fruits of any meager training they may have provided for such individuals (it seems we are always starting from scratch).

All of this is made worse by the unavailability of accredited formal training opportunities within the Pacific Islands, and is further exacerbated by distance learning programmes which are prohibitive in their cost. **THIS IS WHY THE TOOLKIT WAS/IS NEEDED.**

The Toolkit provides a resource that stands ready to be utilized in areas Pacific recordkeepers feel there is greatest need (for their specific context), or in a manner that will enable them to make the most ground in furthering the recordkeeping cause.

Strategic Use of the Toolkit

What was envisaged was a set of products that would enable practitioners just pick up and deploy. But having spent some time around the issue of Pacific recordkeeping, I think the most value can be gained from taking a more strategic approach in utilizing the Toolkit.

When it comes to how the Toolkit is used in the Pacific, I am not here to provide a prescriptive step by step approach because crucial details differ from place to place within the Pacific; and those on the ground in the various countries and territories are best placed to decide how best to progress recordkeeping in their space. What I will talk about are certain principles or approaches I think might yield more sustainable results, and use our experience in Fiji to illustrate these points.

The temptation with the Toolkit is to immediately deploy it throughout government agencies, but this approach might not be the best in terms of sustainability. For one, you would be focusing at a level of the organisational structure that doesn't have much decision making authority to be able to engender change in attitudes towards records and their management. On top of that, as mentioned above staff turnover is extremely high and this would greatly undermine this approach. Immediate deployment combined with high records staff turnover could have the affect of promising much but delivering little which would devalue the Toolkit. This is exactly the opposite of what the Toolkit was designed to do.

In Fiji, we have avoided this approach, and instead put emphasis on building partnerships, and sought to win over individuals in key organisations which have the ability to influence others. While the progress has been slow, it has also been steady and we feel it better positions us to build solid structures for the long term sustainability of recordkeeping.

Our approach has been to build a good working relationship with the Fiji Public Service Commission, and we have done this by demonstrating value and building credibility to be able to progress our partnership (and recordkeeping) in an incremental manner. We started out by actively offering our services to support the PSC's training arm in the delivery of "Registry Procedures" training for government officers. After a short time we were able to convince the PSC of the need to upgrade this training, and together (utilizing the Toolkit and other resources) we jointly overhauled that programme into what is now "Records Management" training for government officers. From here we were again able progress our working partnership by utilizing the Toolkit to develop a National Records Management Policy which was officially endorsed last year. We will be using this Policy as the thin edge of the wedge, as it enables us now to propose a whole raft of linked policies, standards, specifications, and guidelines. At the end of this year we are on track to have an electronic records

policy passed. NAF has also been able to persuade the PSC to put records management deliverables into the contracts for all Permanent Secretaries.

These incremental moves we think shows the benefit of building partnerships and taking a measured approach to improving recordkeeping. As we take each successive step we are also able to justify submissions for more resources, more training, and more staff. This is another benefit of an incremental approach which focuses on decision makers. It makes the changes we want to bring manageable. If we were to just go for an all out approach, we wouldn't be able to deliver because Pacific Archives are so under-resourced. This would again devalue the Toolkit, and managers and decision makers would come to view PARBICA Toolkit recordkeeping reform initiatives as "pie in the sky" exercises.

PARBICA Credibility

The Toolkit also adds to the credibility of Pacific recordkeepers. While we have much room to grow the Toolkit shows that as a professional body we have a real sense of awareness, both self awareness and an awareness of global trends and requirements. In addition the consultative and collaborative approach used to put the Toolkit together ensures it is accessible, relevant, and culturally acceptable. But most of all it shows that we are proactive, trying to get in front of the problem. So that when we present the Toolkit as a true Pacific solution, it is difficult for others to dismiss or ignore.

Concluding Remarks

As demonstrated in the beginning of this exchange, the PARBICA Toolkit provides a much needed recordkeeping resource, but more than that its modular nature also enables Pacific practitioners to utilize those portions which they feel can gain them the most ground for their overall recordkeeping strategy. The Toolkit has had a direct impact on our ability in Fiji put recordkeeping on governments agenda, and by building partnerships and taking an incremental approach we hope to use the Toolkit do a lot more.