

Doing business with Government Departments – How Archives can establish trust and build relationships.

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Summary

State and National Archives work closely with Government Departments and Agencies who are major creators of public records. While there is a legislative mandate that binds the relationship between them, it takes more than law to build strong, productive relationships.

Over an 18 month project, the Public Record Office Victoria (Victoria's State Archive) dedicated a project team¹ to look at refocussing their electronic record strategy through a formative review. Although not the major focus of the review, a subset of research looked at re-establishing and building the relationship between the Archive and the Victorian Government agencies it serves, to better understand their needs and build consensus for future direction of the strategy. This paper aims to share the key relationship findings.

Background

Like many Archives around Australia, the Public Record Office Victoria has legislation² which firmly places the Archive in a central role within the information and records management space. The legislative mandate also gives rise to a formalised relationship between the State Government and its agencies. Whilst this role allows for the development of relationship with these agencies, the Government Services area within the Public Record Office Victoria (PROV), found that over time, these relationships were beginning to falter and lacked commitment. This led to negative impacts on:

- growth within the relationship (ability to talk more broadly about other opportunities)
- innovation in process or approach (ability to discuss feedback and innovation)
- strategic developments within the sector (ideas and strategy).

During 2010, and seemingly unrelated to these challenges, PROV began assessing the direction and performance of their Victorian Electronic Record Strategy (VERS³). Heading toward a decade of use, and acknowledging the changes in that time to the technology environment, the project looked to re-establish the approach to the management of electronic records. This was known as the VERS Refresh project.

As the project gained pace, it became increasingly apparent that these relationships, already identified as challenges within PROV, were in fact, crucial to imbedding a future-proofed electronic record strategy for the next decade.

1 The VER Refresh Project Team was made up of David Brown (PROV), Cathy Meynell-James (PROV), Alison McNulty (PROV), Andrew Waugh (PROV), Nicholas Leask (Landell Consulting), Teri Whiting (Landell Consulting)

² The Public Record Act 1973

³ VERS is the Victorian Electronic Records Strategy developed by PROV to provide the framework, including transfer format and metadata specifications, for the management of digital records by Victorian Government Departments.

Project Methodology

The VERS Refresh project team delivered seven specific products as a result of the VERS Refresh project:

1. VERS Problem Statement
2. The Victorian Electronic Records Strategy
3. Stakeholder Meeting Notes
4. Current State Review
5. Future State Options (Volumes 1 & 2)
6. VERS Future State
7. VERS Implementation Plan⁴

Together these reports built a case for the advancement and repositioning of VERS for the next decade and recommended changes across all layers of the strategy and its context.

The recommended changes were expressed under five major streams:

1. The Victorian Electronic Record Strategy itself
2. PROV
3. Program of Work
4. Implementation Approach
5. WOVG Governance

Further information on these reports and the direction of VERS is available on the PROV Website⁵.

However, the focus on building trust came from the research that highlighted to PROV the need to focus on building relationships within Government, through the Stakeholder meeting notes and Current State Review documents. This was also picked up in the recommended changes to PROV.

Key Findings

Highlighted in the VERS Refresh project⁶ was the difference between the Government Departments with which PROV deals and PROV itself. These differences can make or break a relationship, can hinder communication and can drive a wedge further between the archive and the government agency. However, when acknowledged and addressed, these challenges can become powerful tools in the establishment of trust and relationship building. In particular, our lessons can be classified around 4 significant areas:

⁴ Further information on VERS Refresh products is available on the PROV Website or by contacting Cathy Meynell-James, Senior Manager, VERS Projects on 0419 580 865

⁵ The PROV website is www.prov.vic.gov.au

⁶ Stakeholder meeting notes and Current State Review documents.

- **Linguistics and definitions** – for example words which many Archives take for granted, such as ‘record’, ‘disposal’, ‘permanent’, ‘temporary’, ‘access’ or ‘digital signature’ all have different meanings dependant on the user and their working environment.
- **Organisation’s cultural values** – for example some Departments are action-oriented departments that ‘make it happen’, versus the tendency of some Archives to research, ponder, debate and want to get it ‘right’.
- **Leadership styles & expectations**, including individual personalities types & preferences – for example, some leaders are collaborative by nature, outgoing, networkers, whilst others may be introverted, researcher and academic types.
- **Mandates** – for example some Departments have only 500 staff and a small mandate for their service delivery. Compared to PROV, the whole of Victorian Public Sector mandate is for 230,000 public sector employees.

Lessons Learnt

Over 18 months, the research conducted in the VERS Refresh project helped PROV identify many opportunities for improving our relationships with the Government Agencies with whom we work.

PROV’s experience has taught us that the keys to increasing trust and building stronger relationships are:

- Understanding Government language (don’t talk archival speak, stay in their world, understand their needs, their language and their business)
- Understanding the key cycles in governments (elections, caretaker government, parliamentary sitting dates)
- Addressing pain points for their business needs as opposed to selling archival approaches (talk about business continuity, not permanent records)
- Understanding political impetus (what is the political pressure on their organisation and how can we help and maintain relevance e.g. information security)
- Showing Leadership (giving them direction where this is uncertainty, joining the dots in the complicated world of electronic information and records)
- Getting away from the end of the record cycle, and moving to creation.

PROV has successfully embedded much of the learning within our work program and operating approach, and have sought to share the leanings across the Archive.

The outcome of this new approach has seen a terrific increase in trust, stronger more robust relationships and increased engagement. The work that we are undertaking is now better aligned with the values and the expectations of the Government Agencies. Furthermore, we have developed new relationships, with strategic focus and support that we never thought possible.

Whilst there will always remain a level of challenge working within legislative mandates with agencies who often have other priorities, the skills we have learned have enabled us to bridge the gap and build a brighter future.

During the ICA conference in 2012, we are pleased to share our learnings with other Archives and collecting institutions, and we welcome you to also join the conversation by way of feedback, additional key leanings or sharing your experience with us.

In conclusion, whilst our words of advice are important, it pays to bear in mind this saying by George David Miller, that "Trust becomes solidified when words are constantly backed up by deeds".

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