

I'm convinced that, in order to flourish in the digital era, archivists must be as comfortable working with electronic records as they are with paper records. For most archivists – possibly for most people – paper is second nature. We seldom think much about the activities of filing, retrieving, or reading paper records. But for many, electronic records remain somewhat alien; filing, retrieving, or reading those records may require a call to a “geeky” friend or tech support.

During the past several months, I have spent a fair amount of time talking with colleagues about the new skills that archivists need to work with digital materials. In a recent conversation, Joan Krizack of Northeastern University reframed the issue, noting that, “The larger question is, ‘What is our job in the digital era?’” Joan’s comment helped shift my attention from techniques to purpose, from tactics to strategies. Before we consider how digital records demand new techniques, we must first think about how the digital era requires a fundamental rethinking of what we do. [THIS LAST SENTENCE COULD ALSO BE THE CALLOUT.]

Information technologists and others are staking claims on archival turf, and the new format is forcing significant – potentially revolutionary – changes on our profession. This reality poses a very real threat to our profession if we fail to respond and adapt. Rather than reacting with fear, we should embrace the digital era for the new opportunities it provides. We must take advantage of digital materials and technology to achieve our core responsibilities in new ways.

**I believe that archivists’ core responsibility is to help individuals and society remember what is important by capturing and protecting records that provide authentic and reliable information about the past.** That objective does not change in the digital era. Nor do the intermediate goals of appraisal, physical and intellectual control, reference and access, or preservation change.

**Archivists appraise records to identify those of permanent value.** We know how records may be used over time, by different audiences for different purposes. We understand the documentary universe, including areas that are well covered in existing collections, as well as gaps in that universe. I firmly believe that appraisal is the archivists’ single most important job and the skill that differentiates the profession. We must look for new uses for information in digital forms and how technology can be used to find new value in records.

**Archivists acquire materials while protecting their authenticity and reliability.** The web and intranets offer new opportunities to acquire information that was often hard to find. As a result, we have a chance to build more complete collections. At the same time, we must find ways to demonstrate that materials captured by the archives (rather than delivered by the creator) are trustworthy.

**Archivists arrange and describe their collections to maintain physical and intellectual control and to preserve context.** Traditionally these practices were based on the principles of provenance and original order. We focused on aggregates (collections, series, and folders) rather than items to scale the task to a manageable size. Given the exponential growth of electronic records, archivists have a lot to teach others about working with large collections of information. At the same time, we should recognize that the ability to automate the analysis of large collections of digital materials offers new approaches that, for some purposes, may be superior.

**Archivists preserve the materials in their collections, protecting them from the threats of deterioration, disaster, theft, and malicious destruction.** Digital preservation will be more than locks and keys, migration, and controlled environments, but will include firewalls and robust backups. Preservation programs will include media and software migration. The good news is

that the ease of duplicating electronic records means we can keep disaster recovery copies of all our records offsite.

**Finally, archivists help patrons find the records they need.** Many archivists have successfully embraced the web as a means to let the world know about and gain access to our collections. More and more findings aids and digitized collections are accessible through the Internet, not just in reading rooms. The challenge, now, is to help all archives provide this virtual access to their collections.

While the fundamentals of *what* we do remains the same, we must be willing to reconceptualize archives. We must think creatively about *what else* we can do to accomplish our goals. Similarly, we must be willing to reengineer *how* we do our jobs. We must recognize that techniques we used were not sacrosanct and often reflect a compromise between the ideal and the possible. For example, many patrons expect or want an exhaustive index to the holdings, but we give them a finding aid that is frustrating and unhelpful for their particular query. The archival goal is access, not finding aids, and digital materials present an unprecedented opportunity to reach that goal in ways that seemed an impossible dream not too long ago.

These new opportunities do not make everything we have done obsolete. In many instances, traditional and novel approaches will be complementary. Full-text search seems ready to take the place of finding aids as the primary search tool of online documents. But finding aids remain much more effective at documenting a record's context. We must not think in terms of "either, or" but of "both, and." Can we develop a hybrid search engine that returns results in a structure organized by context?

If we are to succeed in the digital era, we must be prepared to completely reengineer our profession. We must keep foremost in our minds *what* we want to accomplish and then look for new and better ways to achieve those ends. If we blindly automate current practice, recreating a physical world in a virtual environment, we run the risk of recreating a system that suffers the limitations of the past and fails to take advantage of new tools at hand.

We must be open to radical new ideas that may portend a paradigm shift. To do that, we must learn a completely new set of skills in short order. We need to be familiar with new tools to find new techniques appropriate to the digital era. However, we cannot be so focused on the tools and techniques that we forget what we are doing or why it is important. We must always remember, first and foremost, "What is our job in the digital era?"