

# Records, Trust (And Lack Thereof)

BY STEPHEN BEDFORD

A discussion about duplicates, and why they are not always bad.

Keeping records is a good way of building trust and mitigating against a lack of trust.

**M**y first case story involved what I thought was an investigation into unnecessary duplication but turned into something else entirely.

## CASE STORY 1

Late last century, I was conducting a recordkeeping survey for a business unit of the State Library of NSW. The library at that stage was keeping its records in paper.

I noticed that a moderate amount of storage space was taken up with copies of purchase orders. Taking a very "straight down the line" "single source of truth" and "storage and disposal approach", I asked the record's custodian why they needed to keep these copies. Why couldn't they ask Finance for their copies if they needed to check something?

"Because we don't trust Finance" was the response. "They keep allocating other branches purchases to our cost centre."

The scales fell from my eyes.

Understanding record keeping requirements was very "trendy" in the profession in those days. The recordkeeping requirement for the central Finance copies was to meet the requirements of the Public Audit and Finance Act – this requirement expired after 6 years. The recordkeeping requirement for the local copy was to win arguments with Finance – this requirement expired 3 months after the end of the financial year (because you couldn't re-journal mistakes after that).

The recordkeeping requirements were different – they were not duplicate records; they were different records.

### BAD POETIC INTERLUDE - THE TAO OF RECORDS MANAGEMENT

During the 70s and 80s, Westerners often misappropriated Eastern philosophy, evident in works like "The Tao of Pooh" and "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance." Here's my attempt at a reinterpretation (inspired by Chapter 38 of the Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu):

*"When the Tao is lost, there is goodness.  
When goodness is lost, there is kindness.  
When kindness is lost, there is trust.  
When trust is lost, there are records."*

Records need to be kept by both sides of transactions and interactions between parties, partly to ensure that those parties agree with what happened, including any promises made and delivered. How many of us have been in the ultra-embarrassing situation of asking for a copy of a contract with a service provider because we have lost our own copy.

In larger organisations with competing priorities, cultures and ways of working, it may not be possible to have a "single source of truth", where the custodian of that source has their own interests. Both "sides" need to keep records because of a lack of trust.

### WHY ARE WE WORRIED ABOUT DUPLICATION IN THE FIRST PLACE?

This is the bit about duplicates if you haven't already guessed.

Duplication has some positive features, redundancy in the face of loss or disasters is one of them. So, why are we so concerned about it? Why do many vendors offer identification and elimination of duplicates?

### Storage /processing resources

This is a legitimate concern. In the physical environment I would contend that there is a more linear relationship between storage volumes and storage costs.

In the electronic environment, exponential growth has its own storage cost implications.

As well as costs, there are concerns about duplicates jamming up search results. Let's investigate this concern in more detail.

- Partly this is caused by the "everything's a record" approach which captures all documents into corporate records systems irrespective of their status (but that's another discussion, see Problems with the Australian Approach to Records Management IQ December 2023).
- This also due to confusion about the status of duplicates – which is the authoritative version?

**Whenever I see documents without business context in a recordkeeping system (e.g. documents saved into an EDRMS), I give a little sigh of disappointment.**

### Confusion about copies, versions and their status

When confronted with duplicate records, a common first thought is which is the "real" one? I would argue that if you need to ask that question, we have failed in our job as records managers. Why?

An important part of good recordkeeping is preserving the business context of the record.

This copy should have been captured with its business context (e.g. "this is the draft before it was submitted to the board"). The context can be through:

- The email which the copy is attached to.
- The MS Teams post linking to the document.
- The workflow step linked to the version in the business system.
- Or via some other means.

Records are overwhelmingly about communications.

Working in NSW, the requirements for business context about a communication come from s 71 of the Evidence Act 1995:

- The content of the message
- The origin
- The destination
- The date and time of sending.

Whenever I see documents without business context in a recordkeeping system (e.g. documents saved into an EDRMS), I give a little sigh of disappointment.

### CASE STORY 2

Records management is often seen to be about legislative compliance.

This is not always the case, and I can prove it.

Let's examine a form of enterprise where legal compliance is frankly the least of their motivations – a criminal enterprise.

One common trope in hardboiled detective stories, is that criminals maintain two sets of books: one to convince authorities they are legitimate, and a second set that reflects their true activities. If it's just about complying with legislation, why do they bother keeping the second set?

Again, it comes down to building (and enforcing) trust – in this case, honour amongst thieves.

No – this is not a personal case study, Officer.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen Bedford spent 10 years as an archivist at the

Archives Authority of NSW (now State Records), much of that time advising on records management matters. He then decided he probably should become a records manager, to understand what he was advising on. He has worked at the Reserve Bank of Australia, the NSW Department of Education and Training, the State Library of NSW, and the Australian Broadcasting Authority. He was the chair of the Records Management Classification Subcommittee IT21-09 of Standards Australia, and currently works for the NSW Department of Customer Service, Sydney, NSW.