Like water dripping on a stone

This article gives an overview of two communities of practice established at the University of Melbourne (UoM) to support good information governance in the university community. It examines their role and their relationship to wider communication networks within the university.

By Adelaide Parr and Sally Newton
It's almost an inevitable conversation we have with our colleagues. We are under resourced, understaffed and we work in a fast changing industry, with additional responsibilities becoming our challenge daily. Yet we are not alone in our organisations. We are surrounded by colleagues whose day-to-day work is the focus of our activities. With support, training and coordination, these colleagues can become our best allies in wearing away ignorance about information management.

The university was established in 1853. The members of the university community include academic and non-academic staff, honorary staff and alumni. The university is considered a public agency in Victoria, and is therefore subject to the requirements of the Public Records Act (Vic) 1973 as well as privacy and other legislation with regards to information management. By ensuring compliance with the recently published PROV standards, the university also ensures that it is compliant with ISO records management standards, and best practice requirements for records management, ensuring a compatibility of approach between the university and its local, national and international counterparts.

The vice-chancellor has responsibility for the university’s compliance with relevant legislation, but has, in the main, delegated this responsibility in various ways. This often means that working in a cross-organisational way is made complex and challenging. In the vice-chancellor’s own words:

‘A longstanding commitment to a devolved organisational culture carries with it considerable overlap and complexity’ (Vice-chancellor’s email to all staff, 1 July 2013)

In an effort to deal with this complexity, the university adopted Responsible Division Management (RDM) in 2009. This devolved management model represents a renewed commitment to local decision-making and accountability. Faculties and graduate schools, several administrative divisions and numerous research centres and institutes have a high degree of latitude in the way they implement their business, including adoption of systems. This includes the key responsibilities of finance, human resources, occupational health and safety as well as records management.

To support RDM, practice leaders were appointed in the domains of Advancement, Facilities Management and Sustainability, Finance, Human Resources, Information Technology, Engagement and Partnerships, Marketing and Communications, Occupational Health and Safety, Records Management, Research, Student Recruitment and Student Services. Practice leaders are expected to provide guidance in their domain, to promote the responsibilities of staff in that domain and to ensure the university’s compliance with relevant legislation and regulations.

The practice leader for records management is the general manager, University Records and Policy. The position is supported by a records management policy and associated procedures as well as an enterprise classification scheme and a retention and disposal authority. Frameworks and tools are in place to enable compliance with the relevant legislation.

In practice it is generally the high level corporate records, formerly managed by the Central Records Office of the university, which are managed using specific records.
management software, HP TRIM. Other key enterprise systems capture information relating to university-wide functions including Human Resources, Finance, Research Management, Property Management and Student Management. With this devolution of information management to other systems, the Records Services unit also has a responsibility to ensure that these systems are managing information in a way that complies with legislative obligations as well as meeting business needs.

Outside these systems a large amount of information is stored on department or work unit shared drives by academic and professional staff. This information is backed up regularly but may not be organised and managed to the highest standards. The challenge is to change the culture of an organisation where information and records management has been seen as a solely central responsibility rather than a devolved one. A further challenge is spreading the understanding that, as a public record is anything made or received in the course of a staff member’s duty, every staff member is creating records and has a responsibility for records management.

Communities of practice often start out as loose networks and build into a community. Commentators such as Cox have noted a shift in emphasis in a period of just over 10 years from communities of practice as opportunity for learning to a form of knowledge management. ‘The dominant usage of the term “community” of practice, at least in the organisational literature, is now to refer to a relatively informal intra-organisational group specifically facilitated by management to increase learning or creativity.’ (Cox, 2005, p.538) It is this definition that best fits the way in which the University of Melbourne generally constitutes its communities of practice, including those built around information management.

There are many benefits to using a community of practice model to support information management activities within an organisation. The model enables people with an interest in or responsibility for a domain such as information management to meet and discuss issues and exchange knowledge about this domain. It helps promote a consistent approach across the organisation and provides an intra-organisation network that can both support information management professionals and other colleagues within the network. In addition, the relative informality of the model can be an advantage as it allows staff to develop a peer to peer relationship with individuals from many different areas and information management staff in a no-fault (and often cathartic) environment. When considering the size and complexity of the university, there were few other models that would have the same impact and potential to build a recognised and ground-up movement towards effective information management practices and compliance.

While measuring the success or impact of communities of practice can be difficult, anecdotally, the two communities discussed within this paper are having a positive effect on the wider community. While the effects of community activities can take time to appear, the implementation of tools such as the Continuous Improvement Program (discussed below) has started a more formalised undertaking of this process and will, in time, provide a more systematic and quantitative analysis of the benefits of this kind of approach.

**Communities of Practice**

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AT THE LOCAL LEVEL: THE LIMEs

In 2009 a year-long project to reform the University Library’s shared drive was completed and the project team disbanded. The challenge was to ensure that the new structure of the shared drive, based on the university’s enterprise classification scheme, was maintained. A community of practice was suggested as a way of maintaining the new structure and ensuring good practice in information management continued.

Local information management experts (LIMEs) were initially nominated by supervisors of work groups across the library. Over time, other LIMEs volunteered to join the network.

Our standing comment on the matter is “in many ways the LIMEs picked themselves” which, while a terrible pun, is true. They are generally individuals who care about information management, appreciate the efficiency of working in a well-organised information environment and who passionately want to contribute to maintaining that environment.

Currently the LIMEs role is not part of the formal job description for library staff. A role description for LIMEs has been developed and participation in the group is noted in the annual performance discussion.

The LIMEs’ role is to provide an overview of the rationale behind the library’s shared drive to members of their work group, to act as a point of contact on issues relating to the shared drive and to promote the use of the shared drive manual and guidelines.

Members meet regularly, currently, six times a year. The meetings are conducted reasonably formally. There are terms of reference, a written agenda is circulated before meetings and decisions made are recorded. All this information is freely available in the shared drive for all library staff.

LIMEs members are encouraged to raise information management as a standing item at work group meetings. This gives them the opportunity to raise issues discussed at LIMEs meetings as well as bring the concerns of their work group back to the community of practice. The group has been coordinated by a member of the project team. As the group has evolved and matured, this is now changing as other leaders emerge. This is common to well-developed communities of practice and is encouraged as it contributes to the sustainability and longevity of the group.

Activities of the group include:

- revising the shared drive manual and guidelines.
- conducting regular ‘spotlight’ on a function in the shared drive.
- discussing and deciding on the best place to file commonly used documents
- sharing useful shortcuts such as how to embed the file path into a document footer to assist with good practice.

Individual LIMEs may also maintain a register of file locations for their work group.

AT THE ENTERPRISE LEVEL: THE LRCs

The local records coordinators’ (LRCs) network was developed more formally than the LIMEs. Unlike the passionate, but self-selected ad hoc nature of the LIMEs, the LRCs were formed to be a group where the key selection criteria were slightly different. The role of LRC was established in conjunction with the introduction of RDM and the evolution of the practice leader role. In line with Cox’s definition of the ‘specifically facilitated’ group, each business area was asked to nominate an individual who would take on the role of disseminating information back to the business area, and to provide a local contact for other staff. The role was also intended to provide feedback to records staff.

Distributed LRCs with a base level of knowledge about records management requirements and compliance needs can provide useful local practice knowledge to centrally located records staff. Key to the implementation of the LRCs was ensuring the right person was selected. LRCs are not volunteers, they are nominated by a manager. Ensuring that they are enthusiastic, interested in the work required and have sufficient standing within their business areas to influence the actions of others is not automatic. This has led to some refinement of the process and additional requests for nominations over time. In addition, ensuring that this work is recognised is also proving to be a challenge. Currently in development are statements which reflect this involvement that can be added to performance management plans.

The LRC network also meets at least four times each year with an agenda that usually covers information sharing and presentations. Activities include:

- workshops to develop knowledge or skills in specific areas such as disaster preparedness, disposal, classification and so on
- guest presentations from specialists on topics such as privacy, digitisation and audit
- encouragement of participant-led discussion.

Presentations from network meetings are published on a website and in the past have been disseminated through a collaborative web space (Sakai).

The establishment of the groups isn’t the only consideration for the creation of effective communities of practice. Administrative support for network meetings must be sustained and tools and materials for ongoing use need to be developed and disseminated to support the participants. Examples of support tools that have been developed for the LRC community of practice include:

- case studies to use in quarterly meetings
- an assessment and planning tool, the Continuous Improvement Program for Records Management (the CIP), which allows staff to assess their business units without needing records management training, and then develop strategies using clear and simple steps to better records management.

Through the implementation of the CIP, it has been possible to start a process of determining key performance indicators (KPIs) for records management within the university. A recent Records Review undertaken by the university’s Internal Audit, Records Management and Finance and Planning teams, which used the CIP as its information gathering methodology, has led to an understanding of the base state of records management and the level of compliance with legislative
requirements currently in place with each business unit within the university. From this baseline assessment, the CIP will then allow for ongoing assessment of records management maturity as well as the effectiveness of the LRCs.

One of the key recommendations from the Records Review was that the LRC network should be strengthened and prioritised as a method of dissemination of good practice in records management. This recognition from areas outside the usual records management cluster confirmed the value of the community of practice model in the university’s unique and challenging situation.

SPREADING THE WORD TO COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AND BEYOND

In addition to regular meetings of these two communities, Information Awareness Month has provided an opportunity to engage the wider university community in a range of activities designed to promote better information management practice. Each year a project group is formed, activities developed and promoted, then evaluated and refined for the following year. The activities are designed to be educational, informative and fun.

In 2011, the group devised a short quiz designed to assess participants’ familiarity with common aspects of information management. More than 500 staff participated in the quiz and prizes were awarded for participation. Consisting of five simple questions, the quiz also highlighted areas of weakness in understanding across the university community, allowing for a more effective targeting of future activities.

In 2012, staff were offered ‘orienteering online’, an activity to show participants more about finding and managing information. This involved staff from areas not traditionally part of the university’s information management community to assist in running activities, and had a spy theme to engage interest. Feedback from participants was that they enjoyed the tone of the challenges and the back-stories created to support the tasks. Feedback from the areas involved showed an upturn in use and understanding of the services that they offered, so the approach was generally agreed to have been successful.

In 2013, however, a different approach was taken. The decision was made to focus on the Enterprise Classification Scheme (ECS) and the Retention and Disposal Authority and their value as tools to enable better information management.

Information Awareness Month 2013 began with a workshop ‘Explaining the Enterprise Classification Scheme’ which was open to all staff. Following this workshop a personal challenge was issued to undertake a 12-step program. Over 70 staff signed up for the challenge and they were sent three emails a week for four weeks. The emails outlined a structured program of tasks such as appraisal, sentencing, information organisation and disposal – across each of three formats – hardcopy records, electronic records and email. In each format, the implementation of the ECS, the identification of retention periods for the records involved and the communication of key records management ideas were a key consideration.

Not all participants in 2013 were able to complete all tasks. Even where this was the case, informal feedback showed that participants valued the information provided and voiced an intention to keep the instructions for use at a later time.

The activities of Information Awareness Month are designed to support the LIMEs and LRCs in the role of champions for better information management. Members of the two communities of practice have been involved in the development of these outreach activities and were enlisted to support their promotion and uptake.

Records Services also publishes an occasional newsletter On the Record which is distributed to LRCs to provide a continuing source of information on records management topics as well as being a device they can use to promote information and records management locally.

Each issue focuses on a particular area of information management interest, such as staff responsibilities around good information management or retention and disposal. The newsletters are also intended to be used as factsheets for reuse over time. They are made available electronically and in hardcopy for ease of distribution to staff and for reprinting in local areas when needed.

THE FUTURE

Feedback from the 2013 Information Awareness Month personal challenge will contribute to the development of a 12-step team challenge which is currently being developed. The idea is that with the growing awareness of the ECS many staff members will be keen to see it applied in the shared drives of work units. The 12-step team challenge is likely to be run over 12 months. A longer time period is a necessary concession to the volume of work and records under consideration. The challenge will be supported by a range of resources such as checklists and case studies.

Bibliography

These resources will be designed to ensure that they are fresh, engaging, vibrant and easily accessible. They will provide ongoing support to staff and almost automate some of the more basic activities currently occupying the time of information management specialists across the university.

The communities of practice established for information management at the university will continue to meet and evolve. Increasingly, they can become a springboard for further communication activities either through direct involvement or indirect fostering. Information Matters is a group on the University’s implementation of the private social network, Yammer. Established in 2008, there are now over 2,500 staff, more than at third of the total, signed up to Yammer. This group provides a forum for members of the established practice communities and a place to expose information ideas to new consumers. There are plans to increase this use of Yammer. Other suggestions for activities and resources from the LRCs and LIMEs will be trialled and evaluated in conjunction with these groups. One suggestion currently being explored is the appointment of LIMEs to be the stewards of particular functions in the library shared drive.

Communities of practice, at the local or enterprise level provide a way to mentor those individuals with an interest in or responsibility for information management. Community meetings provide the opportunity to raise concerns, work through solutions, share successes and to receive feedback and suggestions. Feedback from active members of the communities of practice is that they feel strongly supported and informed. They see value in their role and have gained confidence through participation. Local change and improvement has been possible in part due to this increased confidence and knowledge.

The time spent resourcing these communities is time well spent as we see the results start to flow through from small initial steps to large cultural change.

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