



**NHPRC ELECTRONIC RECORDS AGENDA
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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Executive summary

The challenges and opportunities that electronic records present are well known and eloquently described in a myriad of documents. For many years, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) has encouraged and supported efforts to meet those challenges and realize the opportunities they represent. Its innovative work has greatly increased the potential to develop effective electronic records programs. To realize fully that potential, the NHPRC should encourage multiple, practical and collaborative engagements among the various communities and constituencies interested in electronic records and digital information resources, so they can work together and share what they learn.

This means a change in orientation from the 1991 agenda, which emphasized research. Analysis and evaluation of NHPRC-sponsored projects, feedback from the NHPRC's constituencies and review of the literature on electronic records indicate that there is now a foundation on which to build programs. As a result, a new electronic records agenda can build on the successful projects, while improving the chances for more and better work. The new emphasis should be on implementation and analysis, with particular encouragement of communication and education, so that all projects have an impact on the archival community.

First, the NHPRC can support the development of more electronic records programs by using targeted initiatives to create practical models for archivists. This will introduce more archivists to the issues and choices they face, giving them a starting point and the confidence with which to move forward. The targeted grants should focus on technological solutions that are practical and available. These need testing and further adaptation to ensure that they meet all archival needs and that they will support: a) further enhancement and improvement; and b) the development of collaborative and educational guidelines for archivists and their constituents. This will help archivists build their capacities to manage electronic records and to demonstrate their skills.

Second, the NHPRC can encourage applicants to build on the achievements of the targeted initiatives by supporting projects that echo four themes: a) new partners; b) education; c) technology as opportunity and; d) a common core of knowledge, skills and tools. These themes will encourage grant applicants to consider the factors that influence and determine the potential for the development of sustainable electronic records programs.

Success will not come as a matter of course. Any agenda for a topic as complex as the interaction of information technology with an established profession – complicated by an array of individuals and organizations of disparate skills and resources – will be problematic. In this framework, no single actor and no single approach will provide the answers. A new electronic records agenda will only provide a starting point. Moving forward, there will be challenges to the resources of the NHPRC and its abilities to fund the necessary work; challenges to the archival profession and its ability to assimilate new

concepts and technologies; and challenges to the abilities of individual archives and archivists to act on their opportunities and translate them into practical programs.

Further, information technology is dynamic: the challenges and the opportunities it presents to archives will change routinely and unexpectedly, so archivists have to learn and re-learn continually which options are available and practical. As well, bureaucracies and organizations are dynamic: as the current budget crises in state governments demonstrate, the missions and staffs of archives will change routinely and unexpectedly, so the archival responses to information technology have continually to be explored and examined. As a result, no single solution for electronic records management will exist, either for all places or all times.

As a result, this agenda aims to provide archivists with a significant amount of flexibility and latitude in determining the goals of their programs, while still ensuring that the investments of the NHPRC provide a return to the profession as a whole. Any agenda has to allow archivists to identify the factors that influence their individual environments and to develop the “local knowledge,” as anthropologists put it, that will enable them to negotiate through their surroundings. At the same time, the agenda has to ensure that these local projects have a larger, national impact.

Certain threads can tie these efforts together. While different environments will offer different opportunities, archivists should recognize that content and access are important drivers for investment in information technology projects. The appraisal of records will be an especially important skill and one of the critical functions of archivists will be identifying and collecting records of value, and particularly records that lend themselves to re-use or re-purposing and to online access.

Over the longer term, the critical role for the NHPRC is fostering the continuing development of social and intellectual capital. As technology becomes practical and affordable, the unresolved questions about electronic records programs will be on the human side of the equation, addressing issues such as education, organization, culture, project management and governance. Many of these will best be explored through practical, hands-on training, followed by analysis and evaluation.

The executive summary of the 1991 electronic records research agenda closed with these words: “The working meeting strongly urged the NHPRC to exert leadership in the electronic records field by establishing specific priorities for electronic records research supported with NHPRC funds, by serving as a facilitator for multidisciplinary research with allied professions, and by encouraging other Federal funding agencies and private foundations to sponsor or support electronic records research.”¹ After replacing “research” with “programs,” that sentence could summarize this report as well. But a different context assigns this statement a different meaning. Building on the experience and the successes of the past ten years, the NHPRC and archivists can much more effectively itemize and prioritize specific steps to take to further those goals. As a result,

¹ “NHPRC: Research Issues in Electronic Records,” http://www.archives.gov/grants/electronic_records/research_issues_summary.html#exec

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more should be expected. Information technology presents a critical opportunity for archivists. They should take that opportunity to realize practical and sustainable electronic records programs at all levels of resources and among all types of organizations.