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AUTHOR(S) Richard J. Cox

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## Book Review

Reviewed  
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**Records Management and Information Culture: Tackling the People Problem.** Gillian Oliver and Fiorella Foscarini. London, Facet Publishing, UK, 2014. 160 pp. \$95.00. (softbound). (ISBN: 978-1856049474)

The purpose of the book is to deal with the “messy and difficult issues” in managing records, matters the authors place upon people with their different backgrounds, attitudes, education, and notions of records and their value to organizations and society. This is not a new topic in the archives and records management literature, although the approach of this book is quite different from the norm. Oliver and Foscarini offer “practical guidance on using the concept of information culture” to provide records management practice (pp. xi-xii), so there is a distinctly theoretical bent. They also offer their insights and advice based on years of research studies, bringing their work experience, teaching, and research from a variety of nations and organizations. The result is a very important book to be read by both practitioners and academics in the field. The authors state that they have aimed their book primarily at the practitioner audience but also academics engaged in research and teaching; the book is very successful with the latter purpose, as explained below.

*Records Management and Information Culture* builds around the idea of the “information culture framework” (ICF). The authors provide a detailed background for this idea, noting that their own take on it is the “records continuum,” a concept that emerged out of Australian practice and teaching 20 years ago and that has been an important contribution to archives and records management knowledge (perhaps the most significant such contribution in the recent past). The authors do discuss alternative theories and models of information culture, which students and academics will find useful, but practitioners might find distracting from the approach that the authors are taking. Likewise, academic readers will find the authors’ description of their own independent and collaborative research valuable, whereas practitioners will likely want to peruse this quickly. This research is spread out over a number of years and different settings, affirming their sense of the importance of information culture: “All organizations have an information culture no matter what sector they are active in, where in the world they are located, regardless of their size, complexity, and extent of their information technology capabilities” (p. 11).

The authors assume that there is extensive knowledge of the records continuum model (and this may not be as true as they think). They note there are other “continua models” and describe these. They wisely provide background on the development of the continuum model and its uses, clarifying somewhat the problem with fuzzy understanding and use of this model outside of Australia (archivists and records managers in the United States—at least the practitioners—cling to the records life cycle notion, an idea with far greater limitations than the continuum model). They argue for the continuum’s practicality with statements such as this: “The four dimensions (create, capture, organize and pluralize) and the four axes (recordkeeping, evidential, transactional and identity) can be used as practical tool to identify at which stage of development an organization is at in terms of managing its information as evidence, for accountability” (p. 13), the quite complex detail in the model can overwhelm its use by practitioners working to grapple with everyday problems and challenges. Some parts of the book may help to alleviate this problem, especially if it is used more widely by academics preparing the next generation of archivists and records managers.

The value of the continuum can be seen in the differences it provides in conceptualizing what records are, where they come from, and how they can be managed. Oliver and Foscarini challenge the idea that records can be managed easily, that they are fixed and can be controlled, and that records managers are not alone as key players. “The notion that records are static objects that can be inventoried is completely at odds with our world of complex and emerging digital technologies and systems” (p. 21), they state. The authors adhere to the idea of “recordkeeping informatics” with recordkeeping being the primary discipline. They also argue that records managers have long known organizational culture to be important, but this concept is “nebulous”, whereas “information culture . . . consciously embraces multiple layers of culture . . . and, most importantly, ensures that attention is directed to the heart of the matter, information, and yet does not ignore the underlying and encompassing organizational contextual issues” (p. 19). It should be pointed out that some of their ideas mirror their backgrounds in Australian and European records management, where archives and record management is seen as a unified discipline, but such is not the case in other regions of the world. Perhaps their book will help to close the gap in such knowledge and lead to stronger adoption of the continuum model for teaching, research, and practice.

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1 The book is set up to enable the reader to learn about the  
2 continuum model and assess the records administration in  
3 their own organizations. They state that “any assessment  
4 methodology, if it is to be implemented successfully by  
5 organizations, has to be relatively simple and straightforward”  
6 (p. 24), and few will disagree with this. In fact,  
7 records managers have been armed with a variety of tools  
8 that affirm exactly this sentiment. Most records managers,  
9 for example, will know about generally accepted accounting  
10 principles (GARP), promoted by the Association of Records  
11 Managers and Administrators (ARMA), an assessment  
12 system that can be purchased from ARMA. However, GARP  
13 reflects a method that the authors place in the “positivist  
14 tradition,” which assumes that everything can be measured  
15 and quantified (p. 29). Records managers love to provide  
16 quantifiable assessments, and they may be surprised by what  
17 the authors of this book promote in their place. Oliver and  
18 Foscarini contend that their model is more in the qualitative  
19 tradition, enabling records professionals to take into account  
20 the many organizational and societal variables that better  
21 characterize the real world. There is also a sense of being  
22 overwhelmed when considering such reality, and only time  
23 will tell if their explanation is sufficient to help readers to  
24 attain a higher level of success.

25 Oliver and Foscarini make a sincere effort to help those  
26 who wish to consider their approach. The authors lead  
27 readers through the various factors of the ICF, starting with  
28 the most difficult aspect, how the organization values  
29 records, particularly for their evidence and accountability  
30 function. They review the elements of a records manage-  
31 ment infrastructure, such as specialist staff and records man-  
32 agement policies and procedures. The value of the book is  
33 that it describes methods such as surveys, interviews, and  
34 research with very specific examples of questions and other  
35 practical advice, such as using the language that people in  
36 the organization employ. The authors then work through  
37 how information is used and perceived in organizations,  
38 trying to push beyond records management’s exclusive  
39 focus on written records to include oral sources and prac-  
40 tices and to go beyond the predilections of the Western  
41 world by including oral tradition and other communication  
42 forms. The authors examine the new means of communica-  
43 tion, such as group work, and challenge the idea of how  
44 records managers have tried in the past to get people to  
45 recognize that they do not own their information. Oliver and  
46 Foscarini also consider troublesome aspects of information  
47 culture, such as language issues and the barriers that can  
48 come from different ways of expressing and interpreting the  
49 issues posed by records and information systems, including  
50 difficulties caused by the use of professional jargon. Like-  
51 wise, they consider matters of the technology infrastructure,  
52 such as the constantly changing and increasing adoption of  
53 new information software. It is an ambitious agenda.

54 The authors also have two chapters on the competencies  
55 that should be possessed by records managers, a subject that  
56 has been preeminent in the professional literature for quite  
57 some time. One chapter deals with information and digital

literacy skills, and their approach to training staff is refresh-  
ing. They note how generally we have taught procedures, but  
new tasks unrelated to employees’ primary responsibilities  
have proved to be a problem. They convincingly contend  
that we must deliver training that is relevant to one’s work.  
The second chapter in this area concerns “environmental  
requirements,” “an umbrella term to encompass the laws,  
standards and norms present in the broader societal, juris-  
dictional and organizational context” (p. 107). The laws,  
standards, and codes of practice can be just as convoluted as  
the problems that they are addressing. Oliver and Foscarini  
hope that what they are presenting will provide more clarity  
for the task of managing records.

The next two major chapters consider the final aspect of  
the ICF factors, such as the trust users have in their record-  
keeping systems, now mostly digital. The authors look at  
governance issues, primarily policy. They also consider infor-  
mation architecture, security, and cloud computing, among  
other things, giving advice on how to analyze these elements  
and creating a profile of an organization’s records and infor-  
mation management issues and needs. A separate chapter on  
the matter of trust, building from the University of British  
Columbia’s InterPARES project on authentic electronic  
records, is also useful. In this chapter the authors include a  
case study from their own research. The book could be  
strengthened by including more case studies (although this  
could be offset by the reader referencing the many citations  
included in the book). They also briefly discuss ethical issues.  
In their assessment discussion, they urge records managers to  
become ethnographers in order better to explore and under-  
stand organizational culture, an approach that may appeal to  
academics but one that might befuddle practitioners looking  
for more straightforward advice.

The last chapter attempts to bring all of the earlier chap-  
ters together in one unified process, drawing on soft systems  
methodology and genre studies, such as rhetorical genre  
studies. They again emphasize that the “aim of this book is  
primarily inquisitive or explanatory; that is, it is not meant to  
suggest prescriptive ‘solutions’ to general records manage-  
ment problems but rather to help each reader understand  
what goes on in his or her workplace” (pp. 155–156). This is  
an important assertion, but it is one that may frustrate prac-  
titioners. The numerous citations to research studies and  
standards, such as the ISO15489 for records management  
and chapter by chapter references to research studies and  
other theoretical models, are valuable, as are the citations to  
assessment tools for use in determining national and occupa-  
tional culture differences. What might have helped would  
be the inclusion of some summaries of what can be found in  
these studies and tools, something that could have been  
achieved by the inclusion of appendices.

*Records Management and Information Culture* is an  
important book. It ably fulfills one of its two aims, providing  
a useful tool for academics pursuing their own research and  
in their teaching (although the high cost of this volume will  
discourage its adoption for classroom use). It falls somewhat  
short of its aims for practitioners. They need a workbook,

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1 more examples and case studies, and more step-by-step  
2 descriptions. Nevertheless, this book is a major step forward  
3 in enhancing our knowledge of records management work.  
4 It is one of the few efforts to mingle research, theory, and  
5 practice. This will frustrate some but be a great asset to  
6 others.

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Published online in Wiley Online Library  
(wileyonlinelibrary.com).  
DOI: 10.1002/asi.23498

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