

The Ethics of Records Management: Adopting Ethics, Accountability, and Recordkeeping Principles

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E*thics, Accountability, and Recordkeeping in a Dangerous World* by Richard Cox is a collection of essays on the ethical challenges facing records managers and archivists in the 21st century. It is intended primarily for records professionals, though it should be of interest to a wider audience. The chapters consist of revised articles that were previously published and are brought together in this volume with an introductory chapter by the author and a forward by Sarah Tyacke. An index and bibliography are included.

Cox addresses a broad range of topics in this book, some more central to the professional ethics of records managers than others. This review addresses the issues most relevant to the ethical problems undertaken by records professionals.

The Ethics of Recordkeeping

The central argument of the publication is that the ethical role of recordkeeping is to enable organizations and individuals to be held accountable for their actions. Therefore, records and archives management have a societal purpose beyond the private interests of organizations and persons. Nonetheless, the moral context in which records management and archiving are practiced is changing rapidly.

First, the war on terrorism has increased national security concerns to such an extent that providing security (or a sense of security) is trumping

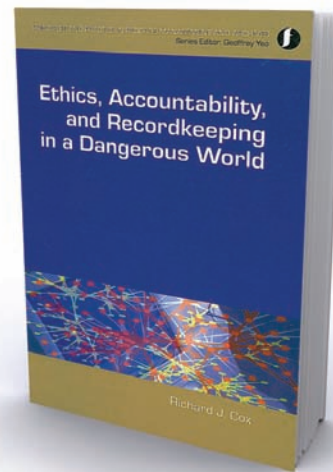
other political values, such as democracy and civil rights.

Second, corporations are under increasing pressure to put short-term profits ahead of other considerations. As a result, in both the public and private sector, there is an increased tendency to tolerate, even promote, deception, falsification, or destruction of records, surveillance, breaches of confidentiality, and intrusion on privacy.

Third, records professionals confront increased pressure to be complicit in such activities or be active participants. They meet difficult ethical dilemmas head on and should be prepared to work in this ethically murky environment in a way that best serves the public interest.

The Whistle Blowing Phenomenon

For Cox, the ethical problem that best represents this concern is whistle blowing. "Whistle blowing" is when a person discloses to the general public (the press) or to the appropriate regulatory authorities that his or her organization is committing a harmful or illegal act. Whistle blowers often have to act against their loyalty to the organization



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and sacrifice their careers in making such a disclosure. Thus, it is critically important to know if and when an individual has an ethical obligation to do so.

Cox argues that records professionals will often be privy to information that reveals wrongful acts and will be put in the classic position of the whistle blower. In addition, though Cox does not distinguish these clearly, records professionals will find themselves in the position of the would-be information leak. They might also be asked to falsify or destroy records, and they might be asked to improperly keep records on a subject or share confidential or private information.

Conscientious records profession-

als will naturally turn to their organizations and codes of ethics for guidance, but Cox worries they will find little direction, as the codes are highly general and not supported by enforcement mechanisms.

Weaknesses in the Framework

Cox's book is very effective in its goal of raising awareness about these issues and providing insight on many others. Records professionals will benefit from reading some or all of the essays, but if choosing just one, the introduction is an effective overview.

The book has some weaknesses. Cox does not seem familiar with the present literature on some of the topics he addresses (e.g., whistle blowing, codes of conduct, privacy, secrecy, deception) and his citations (though broad) prove it. For example, Cox is quite concerned about governmental deception and secrecy, but does not cite two well known works by Sissela Bok

(*Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* and *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment*). The book does not provide much guidance on or analysis of the problems it so effectively warns against. Nor does it make comparisons with other professions where analogous problems arise.

Energizing Records Professionals

This lack of a general and comparative framework limits the effectiveness of the book as a training tool. For example there are numerous discussions in the literature about when an individual is obligated to report improprieties and under what principles this obligation falls. A standard view connects the morality of whistle blowing with a principle of preventing serious harm.

An alternative view, explored by Michael Davis in "Some Paradoxes of Whistleblowing," in *Business and Pro-*

fessional Ethics Journal, connects it with a principle of not being complicit in wrongdoing. Both principles have different grounds, or conditions, of application, so it makes a tremendous difference if either or both applies to the situation of records professionals. A similar point can be made regarding information leaks, refusal to follow orders, and other questions confronting conscientious records professionals.

Cox's book does an excellent job of laying the groundwork for understanding where and how ethical problems will arise for records professionals and should be read in whole or in part by anyone concerned with these problems. It will certainly encourage further and valuable work by others and, one can be sure, by its author. **END**

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