Archival databases and the management of local collections

Databases in an archival context operate as collection management systems. Collection management systems enable: collection management; collection accessibility and collection useability.

This article explores the role of collection management systems in small archive settings. It also looks at current options of collection management software, and at what you need to do to prepare for the implementation of a collection management system in your organisation.

What can collection management systems do?

Collection management systems can help you perform a range of fundamental archival activities.

1. Describe all your records

Collection management systems can describe:

- physical records
- digital records
- objects
- images

all in the once place.

By integrating your paper and digital collections, these systems give you the capacity for a single source of truth. They allow you to have all your archival information contained in the one place at the one time. This has great benefits for you and your collection management, and of course for your users. For your paper-based records, these systems allow you to input all your item listings and have them searchable and accessible.

Collection management systems also give you the capacity to start adding digital items and images to your system as you start to accrue them. If you are coordinating a digitisation program, or gradually imaging your photographs or starting to collect 'born digital' materials, then collection management systems provide the capacity for documenting these holdings, integrating them with existing paper collections, and providing a consolidated search interface to access all your holdings.

2. Help manage your records

Archivally specific collection management systems can enable you to perform and manage the various management tasks you perform on your collection. Because they can track and document the decision and actions you take when managing your collection, these systems provide genuine accountability and a history of the actions performed on an item or collection.

3. Produce information about your collection

One of the significant time-saving benefits of these systems is that you generally input your information into them once, but then you can repurpose it many different ways. For example, once information about your collection is in the system, it is generally very easy to generate different reports that will provide you with: inventories; item listings; accession registers; user guides and online listings of holdings.

4. Share information about your collection

Collection management systems collect a standard set of information about your records. Once you have listed all your records in one of these systems, your collection information will generally be in a standard format that will be similar to the information of many other organisations.

This will enable you to produce consistent information about your collection (metadata) that can be shared, exchanged and distributed online through different portals and search tools. For example, by simply describing your own photos in a collection management system you might also be able to create a description that can be exported and uploaded into Picture Australia. This could enable significant promotion of your collection and make your collection widely available to others.

5. Provide context, context and more context

The great benefit of purpose-built archival software is the capacity for structured description and searching. This just means that these systems break all your descriptive or control information up into chunks, into separate and meaningful sections. By breaking it up like this, users can easily search for any of the separate little chunks and so there are lots of new ways potentially for users to find your information.

Breaking the data into chunks also gives the system itself great capacity to use the information and enable lots of connections to be made between all your separate sets of information. Again, this will open up new connections, enable you to run new reports, generate new finding aids and really build on all the information at your disposal.

In archival environments, context is regarded as very important. Context is a description of the environment in which a record was created. Archival collection management systems have a great capacity to document extensive degrees of context – for example, who created a record, then the office that person worked in, then the company that office was part of, then the organisation that owned that company. They can also record different views of this context through time – ie what the company was called at a certain date, what happened when it merged with company X etc.

The capacity to record all this information enables very rich connections to be made between records and between records over time. This can give your records a very rich context and provide your researchers with many different ways of accessing your collection.

6. Grow with you

A key feature of a good collection management system is that it has the ability to grow with you. The best systems to give you scope and flexibility for the future are what is called 'open source' systems.

If a system is open source it means that full instructions about how it was built and how it works are freely available. This may not mean a lot to you in your daily operations, but it does mean that collection management systems that are built using open source technology can be easily adapted to meet your needs. It would be fairly simple for someone who is tech-savvy to expand, adapt or reconfigure your database, immediately or over time, to meet your needs.

One other exciting thing about open source systems is that if similar associations to yours also use the same system, it becomes quite easy for you to collaborate, share and promote your collections together. You could pool resources and build extensions, integrations and new functionality together.

Cost of these wonder systems

The good news is that high-quality archival collection management systems are available for free. There are a range of commercial applications as well, but here are two good

packages that are open source and that provide all the functionality we are discussing, and provide it for free!

Tabularium

This is an Australian system, developed by the former head of State Records, David Roberts. It works with Microsoft Access and can be downloaded from http://tabularium.records.nsw.gov.au/

ICA-AtoM

This web-based software was developed on behalf of the International Congress on Archives and can be downloaded from their website at http://ica-atom.org/

Collection management documentation using Word or Excel

You can create a form of collection management documentation in Word or Excel but it really isn't a good option.

By creating your own system you are effectively implementing a second-rate, short term fix and duplicating a lot of effort. It also does not possess a lot of the accountabilities and management controls that come with a well designed database.

A database gives you the option of 'create once, use many times' and in a volunteer, community organisation, this is what you want, to meet both your short term objectives and your ongoing management needs.

A self-designed system is also harder to integrate with other tools and so will not enable the sharing and flexibility that an open source, well designed system can provide.

Library and museum software

This may be an appealing option, particularly if it is readily available, but these types of systems are not designed for records. A purpose-built archival tool offers so much more functionality and appropriate controls for archival records, and should be used in preference to any other type of system.

Conclusion

An archival collection management system is a very important tool for the sustainability of your archival collection. These types of databases will help you to: plan for the future of your collection and your facility; transition to the digital environment where maintaining exclusively paper-based collections and finding aids is increasingly less feasible; go to where the people are – research is increasingly performed online and if information about your collection is not accessible here, people will not necessarily come looking for it; easily produce finding aids and reuse your information in multiple ways and plan strategic, accountable and cost effective management of your collection

And they are free!

Bibliography

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Dr Kate Cumming
Project Officer, Government Recordkeeping
State Archives NSW