



## Executive Summary

In response to the Council's request for proposal, Nashel Management Inc. conducted an audit of NSERC Recorded Information Management (RIM) function between April and June 2001 on behalf of the Common Administrative Services Directorate (CASD).

NSERC, like many other organizations, generates information that is recorded electronically and generally printed to paper. This information is then used for planning, decision-making, transaction processing, referencing, and researching. Also, within the federal government context, information serves to respond to access to information and privacy requests. These uses of information correspond to good business practices and accountability requirements.

The audit found that the Recorded Information Management function was for the most part developed and implemented. In addition, the majority of Council's records (which are program case files) were well managed. There are, however, significant shortcomings relating to the corporate management framework, the recorded information management approach and strategy, and some aspects of the information life cycle. The shortcomings are mostly due to a lack of leadership and commitment.

The lack of leadership and commitment within NSERC in managing its records collections, it was found, has had consequences of varying importance over time. Operationally, for instance, the current state of recorded information management has created gaps in the corporate memory, prevented researchers from accessing all required information, decreased the efficiency of processing access to information and privacy requests, and added costs to the processing and storage of records. This has also created an attitude of indifference amongst some staff members about the management of records, led to the illegal destruction of records collections, and created a backlog of records to be organized and disposed of both for paper and electronic-based information.

NSERC needs to address the shortcomings. Furthermore, NSERC should use opportunities such as Government on Line or the increased presence of the electronic medium within the office environment. Such opportunities should help NSERC to create an infrastructure to properly manage its records collections and to benefit from the accumulated knowledge and experience to be found within these.

Specifically, the audit team found three major issues with the management of recorded information within the Council.

**The first** of these issues relates to the management control framework. Like many organizations, the Council has had to face many conflicting priorities. Generally, and understandably, the process of issuing grants and scholarships has had priority over functions such as the management of records. Although records dealing with the review of specific grant applications have been properly organized and controlled, any other types of records (such as subject records) have been given minimal attention and support. This minimal attention and support stems from a lack of a clear and formal mandate from senior management. In the view of the audit team, a perceived mandate, expressed through job descriptions for instance, does not have the same impact as an approved corporate policy.

The minimal attention and support also stems from the traditional recorded information management business model in place at the Council. Such a model requires the Recorded Information Management function to assume physical, central control over all records collections. Under this model, all Council employees have been required to hand over records that they receive and create to the records offices for processing, storage, and disposition. However, the application of this model has not been successfully implemented within the Council. Other complementary solutions are required. The model needs to account, for instance, for the new technology at the disposal of employees and the information explosion having taken place. These new elements present challenges and offer new opportunities of partnership between the function and the employees to more efficiently and effectively manage the Council's records collections. Finally, the fast-paced evolution of technologies has created new expectations from the recorded information function, technological but also managerial in nature.

As a last point on this issue, many aspects of the Recorded Information Management function have been neglected, including the completion of annual plans, goals, objectives, and written procedures, the establishment of controls for monitoring work backlogs and measuring and reporting on activities, and the



provision of guidance to, and the training of Council employees involved in managing records collections. More importantly, the Recorded Information Section has no overall strategy to address the function's deficiencies and the many challenges facing it.

**The second** major issue concerns the Recorded Information Section's approach to managing the Council's records collections. With minimal support and no formal mandate from senior management, the function has been unsuccessful in attaining or facilitating sufficient control over the Council's various records collections. Not being able to produce documentation on time or at all, for instance, leaves the Council open to challenges by the Canadian public, its business partners, and, mostly, the applicants on business practices of NSERC and the decision-making process it applies.

Because of the lack of a mandate, support, and initiative, the Recorded Information Section has been reactive rather than proactive in identifying user needs. Council officials and staff members are conscious of the challenges regarding the management of electronic-based information. They indicated the need for guidance on the management of their e-mail messages, assistance in deciding what information is important to keep and what information they can safely dispose of, and help in structuring their electronic directories. The Recorded Information Section has not met these needs.

As a result, a culture of relative indifference has set in amongst Council staff in the management of records. Large collections of official Council records are not accounted for and records are being destroyed without proper authority. As a result, Council employees do not trust the records offices with the management of their information because records offices staff is perceived to be poorly equipped and lacking experienced.

**The third** major issue identified is about shortcomings in some areas of the information life cycle.

- Council records offices use various finding aids instead of using standardized ones, and the Council cannot take full advantage of technology because automation to support the Recorded Information Management function does not include all functionalities. Furthermore, Council staff create their records electronically while Recorded Information personnel focus on paper-based records. This situation prevents the establishment of a comprehensive approach to the management of the Council's records collections and the development of the necessary technological expertise within the Recorded Information Section.
- Essential information (needed for operating the Council in case of fire or other disaster) is not clearly identified and stored off-site. Litigation and business resumption risks are therefore increased should a disaster occur.
- Council records offices maintain a considerable amount of inactive records that should be moved to an interim storage area such as in B4 (i.e., 90 percent of the total volume of subject records in records offices are inactive and should be removed from prime office space). The net result is an increase in storage costs and deterioration in operational efficiency.
- Although, at the time of the audit, the Council finalized negotiations with the National Archives that will result in the development of a disposition plan for records in all media, the scheduling of records for disposition is incomplete. Retention and disposition



schedules need to be developed for the approval of the National Archivist prior to proceeding with the disposition of records. For the administrative records, Recorded Information personnel did not completely and efficiently apply the retention and disposition schedules. Consequently, records collections of a permanent value are not transferred to the National Archives and records that have ceased to be of value to the Council are not systematically disposed of. NSERC cannot, therefore comply with government information management legislation and policies, and in addition, NSERC cannot realize economy of space and time.

Finally, the audit team recognizes that the Recorded Information Section is currently taking steps to address some of the shortcomings identified in this report, although some of the solutions envisaged will take time and will require management support and monitoring. In order to help redress the situation, the following recommendations are presented:

1. A corporate Recorded Information Management policy coupled with an awareness campaign would serve the Council in enhancing its current practices, increasing its service delivery capacity, and meeting its obligations as a corporate citizen. The policy should be developed with the participation of representatives from branches and divisions and should be endorsed by senior management.
2. A communications strategy should also be developed to identify the priorities and delivery mechanisms. Periodic information sessions and ad-hoc communications to Council employees should then follow.
3. NSERC should update, publish, and promote directives and procedures on the management of its recorded information. These directives and procedures would enable all Council staff to have on-hand reference material and serve to set up the training and awareness sessions previously mentioned. These directives and procedures would also reflect positively on RIS if they were to promote practical approaches and solutions for Council staff in dealing with the daily challenges of managing records collections, regardless of the medium.
4. RIS should review the qualifications of its professional complement in light of the Council's competing priorities, information requirements, and the results of a forthcoming comprehensive RIM strategy. RIS should then make necessary adjustments through the upgrading of the knowledge and experience levels and/or the acquisition of qualified individuals. This exercise may lead to a different organizational/ reporting structure in response to a possible renewed mandate, new services, and adjusted work approaches.



5. RIS must fully assume its functional role within NSERC, including the provision of advice and training to Council employees and the development of effective, user-related tools and solutions. In order to champion the RIM function within NSERC, RIS must also obtain stronger senior management support to effectively carry out its mandate.
6. RIS should review the space requirements and storage equipment layout and type, or the use of it, in the NSERC Records Office to accommodate all current program case records.
7. A comprehensive RIM strategy, with detailed work plans and a project management framework, should be developed. These improvements should help RIS address some of the deficiencies and the many challenges facing it. In addition, the audit team believes that with the development of RIM standards, RIS would be in a position to conduct regular reviews of Council RIM operations.  

These improvements should also enable NSERC to avoid experiencing other possible future inconsistencies, reducing the cost in managing its records collections, closing the gap in the Council's "corporate memory", and reducing the potential risks of not being able to find information in support of decision-making or to respond to access to information and privacy requests. Such potential risks will likely increase further within the next five to ten years when the Public Service, and NSERC, will have to face a large proportion of its work force retiring, and leaving with the undocumented knowledge and best practices.
8. As part of the development of its RIM strategy, RIS should define its role and approach in major corporate information content-related projects and should develop action plans accordingly.
9. RIS should review its methodology and, perhaps, even the type of records classification structure it proposes to implement, involving users in the process to make sure that the structure is complete, accurate and pertinent. This structure should account for all types of records - including paper, and electronic records such as e-documents and e-mail messages.
10. RIS should evaluate the branches and divisions' feasibility of using the services of the records offices or, at the very least, negotiate the most appropriate arrangements with them and formalize these into written agreements. These agreements must define the



responsibilities of both RIS and the branch/division, including the organization and maintenance, access rights, and disposition of the records.

11. RIS needs to work with branches and divisions who are maintaining their own records collections with the view to integrate the current information into the corporate collections.
12. RIS should adjust the corporate records classification system, in consultation with users, to simplify the parallel system approach for the records of an administrative nature held in the Corporate Records Office. RIS should, as well, rearrange, where necessary, the records organized by source rather than by subject.
13. To follow-up on the needs expressed by Council employees, RIS should provide them with the necessary guidance on how to structure their electronic directories, possibly using the corporate records classification system as a base, as well as on what type of e-mail messages that need to be retained and what type that can be disposed of safely.
14. Until more appropriate solutions are put into place to automatically capture records electronically, RIS should pursue its efforts to convince Council employees of the need to continue to use the "patch", with a view to preserve the corporate memory. In some other cases, employees should be encouraged to continue to print copies of important records to be stored into the corporate collections.
15. The Administration Division, in collaboration with the Information Systems Division, should develop an e-mail policy and an e-document policy to set direction, and both policies should be endorsed by senior management.
16. RIS, in cooperation with the Information Services Division, its business partners such as Security and ATIP, and a group of interested Council employees, as well as in conjunction with Council initiatives requiring an e-document infrastructure, should launch a project to identify and acquire the RIM application and infrastructure required to fully manage electronically records.
17. RIS should ensure that the RIM automated application to be selected supports the retrieval aids required by the records offices. The automated application must be capable,



among other features, of providing file history information such as the volume number, creation date, volume disposal actions, medium of the records, and storage location.

18. RIS should implement proper RIM-keeping practices such as file recall whereby records charged out for extensive periods of time are called back to the records office for updating.
19. RIS should eliminate the backlog of loose and unorganized paper-based records in the Corporate Records Office and in the Compensation unit of the Human Resources Division.
20. RIS should take appropriate steps to ensure that classified information be kept under lock in the Corporate Records Office.
21. For the Council to benefit from such a plan, RIS staff should work with officials responsible for emergency planning within NSERC to identify these essential records. NSERC should then take measures to safeguard these records by storing a set of these at a secure site and updating the collection regularly.
22. RIS should start identifying and moving all the inactive records from its records offices to the B4 area and dispose of these by applying the appropriate retention and disposition schedules.
23. Considering the sensitiveness in destroying records, RIS should provide Council employees with clear direction about what information can and cannot be destroyed, in particular, information in electronic medium. A policy in this regard supplemented with training and awareness sessions may help in addressing this issue.
24. RIS should proceed with the updating and the development of retention and disposition schedules for all Council operational records. As well, RIS must discontinue using the obsolete GRDS in applying schedules to the inactive records of an administrative nature.