

**A Report on the Impact Evaluation of the
National Archives and Records Administration's
Federal Records Management Training Certificate Program
Part One**

October, 2007

PART ONE

Introduction

The strategic plan of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) states NARA's responsibility in ensuring the effective management of records created or received by the Federal Government.¹ One strategy NARA uses to achieve this goal is to provide training for Federal personnel on how to manage their own agency's records.

The use of information technology to create and manage Federal records has changed the requirements for Federal records management, and consequently the training needs have changed. To meet the changing needs of the Federal records management community, NARA staff in the Modern Records Programs (NWM) and the Office of Regional Records Services (NR) updated and expanded NARA's existing records management courses, creating one standard national records management training program. Five of these standard courses and their related examinations comprise the Federal Records Management Training Certificate Program (hereafter referred to as the Certificate Program). This curriculum offers training courses in five Knowledge Areas:

- *Creating and Maintaining Agency Business Information (KA2);*
- *Records Scheduling (KA3);*
- *Records Schedule Implementation (KA4);*
- *Asset and Risk Management (KA5);*
- *Records Management Program Development (KA6);*

Since its inception, 587 training participants have successfully completed the Certificate Program courses and passed the corresponding exams; 267 have received a Certificate in Fiscal Year 2007.

To assess the effectiveness of the Certificate Program, the National Records Management Training Program conducted its first impact evaluation (in the form of an on-line survey) in March 2007 after a full year of revised course offerings. The objective of the evaluation was to gauge the impact that the training had on the records management work performance of those completing the Certificate Program

The two basic questions that focused our evaluation were: (1) did the learning acquired from the courses transfer to the workplace; and (2) what baseline data could be collected as a benchmark for future evaluations? In addition, we asked questions such as, "Have the employees used (or expect to use in the immediate future) the skills and knowledge learned in the courses?" and "Have those completing the Certificate Program shown a more significant impact than those not completing the Certificate program?" and "Do employees and supervisors perceive the Certificate of value to their performance of records management duties in the workplace?" Our findings will be used to revise the

¹ Strategic Plan of the National Archives and Records Administration, 2007

Certificate program in order to enhance its impact on the practice of records management in the field.

Participants in the Survey

We analyzed the information collected through a web-based survey administered through NARA's learning management system (see Appendix). We identified two groups: one group we called the "completers," who finished the program during the time period July to October 2006; the other group we called the "non-completers," who took only one or two courses, from July to October 2006. We surveyed both groups in March 2007; this allowed for a three to eight month period *after* their last interaction with NARA that the participants were working at their agencies and had an opportunity to use the skills learned in the courses. Participants in both groups were drawn nationwide.

We gave the two groups almost identical surveys; the survey administered to the non-completers contained one extra item about their intent to finish the Certificate Program. Responses from both groups were statistically analyzed for any significant differences in their answers.

We also surveyed a sample of their agency supervisors and NARA records management staff who are liaisons to those agencies (hereafter referred to as NARA RM staff). Their observations of subsequent records management activities in the agencies following participation in the courses and their perceived value of the Certificate program provided additional information for the analyses of the participant data.

Both groups of agency supervisors provided their observations of records management activities within their agency in the past six months. Using their feedback, we made further quantitative as well as qualitative analyses with the data collected from our completer and non-completer groups.

Similarly, the purpose of querying NARA staff that oversee agencies with completers was to capture their general observations of the records management activities carried out there within the past six months. Because the staff survey asked more general impressions as opposed to skills in specific areas, the feedback was interpreted qualitatively in conjunction with other quantitative analyses. In the cases of both supervisors and NARA staff, their perceptions provided another perspective on the self-reported data from the training participants themselves.

Survey Results Highlights

Survey Responses

The table below summarizes the response rates of the various subjects participating in this study.

	Completers	Non-Completers	Sup A*	Sup B**	NARA Staff
Total distributed	89	104	59	54	43
Total responded	67	37	42	20	34
Response rate (%)	75.3	35.6	71.2	37	79.1

* Sup A refers to supervisors of completers.

** Sup B refers to supervisors of non-completers.

The low response rate of Non-completers and their supervisors (Sup B) limits the conclusions that can be drawn from comparison with the Completer groups. Nevertheless, we can use their data to highlight activity in the Completer group that is notable.

Traditional and Less Traditional Records Management Activities

The results of the participant and supervisor surveys from those who had completed the Certificate program showed a pattern of high engagement in records management activities and positive perceptions about participants' abilities to do the records management work in their agency.

Results also suggested a significant difference between the completers and non-completers in most of their records management activities, including those less traditional activities such as risk analysis and mitigation and training. These comparison data show that participants successfully completing the Certificate program were more likely to put their skills to use in their agency.

Over 60 percent of completers were active or planned to be active in most records management functions included in the survey; over 80 percent were active or planned be active in the following areas:

- KA2 – Determine recordkeeping requirements for own agency
- KA2 – Gather information about records for efficient filing
- KA2 – Identify strategies for satisfying recordkeeping requirements
- KA3 – Apply General Records Schedule to appropriate administrative records
- KA4 – Interpret disposition instructions from many types of records schedules
- KA4 – Determine when and how to transfer records to off-site storage
- KA6 – Market and promote agency's records management program

The most frequent activity appears to be in traditional areas of records management activity, such as scheduling and application of the General Records Schedule (GRS), rather than those areas NARA is encouraging records management to focus on in the future. Only 60 percent reported activity, for example, in less traditional areas such as risk analysis and mitigation, training, or finding external support for records management.

One interesting observation from the frequency data is the high degree of activity in one area related to KA 3, the certificate course on records scheduling. Both completers and non-completers reported a high degree of activity in applying the GRS to appropriate administrative records. Neither group, however, showed a high level of activity in two other behaviors related to KA 3. There are several possible explanations for the reporting of lower activity in these two areas: (1) gathering information about records as a basis for preparing a records schedule; and (2) developing disposition instructions for records based on agency needs. One possible explanation may be that records staff have little need to address new series or systems that require scheduling; another may be that such activity is unlikely to be undertaken by regional staff. The timing of the survey may also be a factor. Some NARA staff survey responses pointed out that their agencies were not active in records scheduling during the 6-month timeframe represented in the survey simply because there was no need for it. Nevertheless, the KA 3 curriculum may be improved by more attention to application exercises.

Statistical test results show clearly that the completer group was more active than the non-completer group in the less traditional records management behaviors. Although we do not have a measure of workplace activity prior to participation in the Certificate Program, we have a proxy measure through the non-completer group's results. The results suggest that the training program is making inroads in changing records management behavior to include less traditional areas of activity such as risk analysis and mitigation and training. Although the greatest impact appears to be in the areas of determining recordkeeping requirements and identifying strategies for satisfying electronic recordkeeping requirements, the measurable impact on newer behaviors is significant.

Five other surveyed activities that were reported by lower percentages of completers might be at least partially explained by the realities of agency records management practice as well. For example, one of the lowest reported activities was transferring permanent records to the National Archives (45.45 percent), not a surprising result considering the small percentage of permanent records.

One KA 6 item (analyzing the need for using external resources (54.19 percent)) would have little utility in agencies where all resources are scarce. On the other hand, two lower-level activities related to KA 5—identify and assess records management risks within your agency's program and prioritize risks and develop mitigation strategies—could be addressed in curriculum revision. Tying risk assessment to real-life vital records planning in KA 5 may enhance the transfer of learning to the workplace. Another lower-reported activity—establishing an effective training program (55.32 percent)—may indicate a need to strengthen the lesson on training in KA 6.

The results of the evaluation have important implications regarding the effectiveness of the Certificate program. While the data confirm the impact on trainees' transfer of

learning back to the workplace, they also suggest areas where the program may be revised to enhance future impact. Specific recommendations appear after this part.

Trainee Development

In addition to results regarding specific records management activities, the data from Items 31-33 regarding perceptions of trainee development confirm very important training outcomes. The analysis clearly shows that completers were significantly higher than non-completers in their perceptions of the value of the Certificate program, their confidence in tackling records management duties, and their ability to help others perform records management tasks. As with the completer group, the ratings of supervisors were uniformly positive on the value of the certificate, the confidence of their employees to perform records management activities and their ability to help others. We can see that the Certificate program has had a positive impact on attitude and self-efficacy; and we can speculate that these changes may affect performance.

Agency support may play an important role in trainees' decision to complete the Certificate program as well as their ability to use the knowledge they gain from it. The analysis shows a significant mean difference between non-completers and their supervisors in agency support. Specifically, non-completer supervisors rated agency support of trainees much higher than non-completers themselves. While this data cannot be completely free of bias (since we cannot be certain Sup B is truly representative of the supervisors of non-completers in general), we can speculate that some non-completers would attribute the cause of not completing the program to the lack of support from their agencies. In subsequent evaluations, it may be helpful to determine what obstacles completers and non-completers faced in pursuing the Certificate program and their reasons for not completing.

NARA RM Staff Survey

The NARA staff survey was included as an effort to triangulate the participant and supervisor data, that is, to provide a more objective perspective on the agency data. Quantitative results from the NARA Staff Survey reported that over 70 percent of the responding staff observed very little or no increase in the records management activities in their assigned agencies within the past six months. Almost 50 percent of the respondents said they had little or no awareness of the agency involvement in the Certificate program.

Responses to the open-ended questions, however, shed some light on these figures. Some NARA staff explained that they were not familiar enough with the agency to rate their records management activities; while others commented that the agency was very active prior to the period sampled in the survey, resulting in a decrease of records management activities during the past 6-month time period. Finally, a number of staff also pointed out that agencies are typically composed of numerous departments or units, and they had no direct contact with the relevant unit in many cases. In short, their ratings cannot be taken

as direct observation of activities pertinent to the participants surveyed. The NARA staff Survey portion of the evaluation design will need to be revisited.

Recommendations

This first experience evaluating the Certificate program's impact points out areas where changes to the design or instruments could enhance the information gleaned from subsequent evaluations. However, when considering the findings of this study, there are factors that affected the results. Completer, non-completer and supervisor respondents were composed of people who voluntarily participated in our surveys. Even though the response rate for completers and their supervisors was high, there may still be some self-selection bias. It is even more likely that the low response rate of the non-completers and their supervisors biased the data. We are also limited in the conclusions we may draw since we have no prior benchmark of measures for comparison.

The resulting baseline data will be used to benchmark the transfer of learning that took place after Certificate completers returned to their agencies and to note improvement in subsequent years. We will use the information from items linked to specific behavioral course objectives to improve the curriculum and instruction of those courses, with a view to strengthening application to real-world, records management practice in the agencies. Specifically, we recommend the following adjustments to the Certificate Program:

- KA 3 – increase material applying skills to the workplace throughout;
- KA 5 – highlight the relevance to vital and essential records management throughout;
- KA 6 – strengthen and enlarge the section on training, perhaps creating an entire train-the-trainer module; include concrete ways to promote the use of NARA training material for participant use in their agencies.

We also recommend that the Impact Evaluation be done in alternating years and a follow-up case study approach undertaken next year. There would be value in targeting two or three agencies that have put a significant cohort of employees through the Certificate program and documenting what change has taken place in the agency's records management activities.

The following changes to the Impact Evaluation design should also be considered:

- Reconsider the staff survey as a method to triangulate the agency's self-report data;
- Reconsider the non-completer comparison and whether response rates can be increased;
- Modify the language of a KA 6 behavioral course objective— "I have established an effective training program for all levels of personnel"
- Replace items #17 and 18—"In the past 6 months I have transferred/plan to transfer permanent records (paper or electronic) to the National Archives."

