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Introduction

I am writing to you regarding the review of the National Archives of Australia ('National Archives') you are conducting and wish to contribute to the Terms of Reference titled *Functional and Efficiency Review of the National Archives of Australia* dated April 2019.

My experience with the National Archives

My interactions with the National Archives of Australia have predominately been to research an unsolved aircraft accident to assist in the location of the aircraft and missing persons on board. This research has exposed me to a number of government agencies and branches within so providing a broad view into the attitudes and approaches used by these agencies in document handling whilst also being exposed to the processes and systems used by National Archives.

Responses to the Terms of Reference

The following are my responses to paragraph 1 of the Terms of Reference. Only subparagraphs of the Terms of Reference relevant to my experiences will be responded to and the original Terms of Reference subparagraphs will be referred to.

1. a) The functions performed by the National Archives in discharging its role and any functions it should cease, continue, transfer or commence

National Archives has functions to perform as specified by *The Archives Act* so, the National Archives plays an important role in support of the Australian democracy and system of government. The primary role of National Archives in simplistic terms is the provision of government information to the people of Australia for personal or professional purposes. This is no small role and is *essential* in an open system of government that Australia employs.

However, an important role that is perhaps intangible and/ or challenging to quantify in specific terms is that of contributing to a *national identity* and strengthening the *bonds of citizens* to Australia. I regularly see and talk to other attendees at the National Archives who are researching various topics with the aim to 'connect' with that person or organisation.

The topic does not need to be the traditional 'ANZAC' topic: people have researched the marine engineer who designed a great Australian made boat, the much forgotten Korean war, the convict who obtained freedom and grew a successful business, the immigrant that arrived at Villawood, the Snowy Mountains Hydro Project, the person that simply 'did his job'.

I strongly suggest that National Archives *increase accessibility* and *actively promote access to*, the *widest* scope of government documents to the people of Australia and in doing so continue playing an active part in contributing to national identity and pride. This requires skilled research officers and efficient information systems both of which will be discussed in future sections on the following page.

1. d) Any barriers (resourcing, legislative or other) preventing the National Archives from fulfilling its core outcomes and functions

There are a number of observations from my interactions with National Archives relating to this area.

Lack of effective cataloguing at *Item* level of most government documents:

Most documents I have attempted to access have not been described at the *item* level. The result of this is impeded access to most documents and less efficient use of NAA human resources.

Although it can be argued that significant resources would be required to better-catalogue/ describe documents, it must be accepted that:

- a. This task must be carried out eventually, and;
- b. The end result would be faster, simpler document access with significant research time shifted from National Archives to the researcher themselves, and;
- c. Access to more documents would result.

Thankfully it appears that all *new* materials being deposited into National Archives are described at item level.

Should most items be described at item level, National Archives research officers could then be much less involved in conducting tasks that the researcher using effective information systems could carry out. This would allow National Archives research officers to be redeployed to work on streamlining customer research pathways- a critical role for the research officer. It must be highlighted here that the National Archives research officer is the key to Australians unlocking information from the National Archives, now and in the future despite what information systems can and will offer.

Agencies locating documents:

In a number of cases during my research, documents that have been known to exist have not been located and at times the originating agency appears to have had little interest in locating the documents. Although it is accepted that agencies need to apply resources to core agency functions, there still is an obligation for agencies to be responsible in the handling and storage of their documents and to facilitate access to them. There does need to be improvements in this regard and perhaps better-education of members of agencies involved in document handling could result in more effective management of documents (eg easier to find, legal obligations to locate documents etc.).

Effective, well trained research officers:

The National Archives needs effective, efficient and well-trained research officers to conduct the necessary human interface with customers. Information systems are not able to replace the competent research officer. The research officer is the key to guiding a customer to a pathway to archived information and are also absolutely necessary to provide a physical presence for security which cameras and other technologies in my opinion cannot replace.

Even if every document was catalogued to a well-defined standard, the present information systems cannot 'join the dots' in the sometimes not so obvious connections between agencies and sections on a research pathway. The research officer can save time for both the customer and National Archives. Without these research officers, I unequivocally can state that I would not have been able to achieve the research outcomes I have thus far: and this is despite my detailed knowledge of the interconnections of government agencies and sections with respect to the documents I was researching.

In the case of a customer who does not have or has only limited knowledge of these inter-agency pathways, the research officer becomes even more important. As stated earlier, no matter what information systems are used, it will still be the research officer that will be the key to unlocking the required pathways and information in an efficient manner.

Efficient and simple to use supporting information systems:

Quite simply, the existing information technology platform used by National Archives is challenging to understand and does not contain sufficient information to facilitate *self-guided* research to achieve solid outcomes on his/her own.

In order to better facilitate self-guided research, the present information system should be overhauled to allow:

- A simpler understanding of the cataloguing system
- A simpler user interface
- Increased description of documents at the item level (aim for 100%)

Even if these points were resolved, the customer without detailed knowledge of government organisations and the manner in which they record information would still have to heavily rely on the National Archives research officer to set pathways.

In closing

I thank you for the opportunity to allow me to comment on the National Archives. I believe the points I offer in this paper are of worth to your review and wish you well with the review process and outcomes.

Best regards,

Glenn Strkalj

30th May 2019