

**Records are practices, not artefacts**  
an exploration of recordkeeping in the  
**Australian Government in the age of digital  
transition and digital continuity**

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the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

under the supervision of  
Dr Michael Olsson and Dr Hilary Yerbury.

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## Certificate of Original Authorship

I, Christopher William COLWELL, declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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## Abstract

Good record keeping is of critical importance to organisations, governments and societies at large, however the language of records management with its inflexible and dominant view of managing records as artefacts - the passive and objective by-products of business activity - tends to be the only lens through which the documentary reality of organizational life in the recordkeeping disciplines is examined. A more user-centric and holistic view is needed to produce better recordkeeping outcomes in organisations.

This study applied a practice theoretical approach to explore the perspectives about records held by various professions employed across four different Australian Government agencies. The study also explored the influences of organizational culture and professional background on these perceptions. Using comparable sites, semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis were carried out. This approach to the study is significant as it is the first study to use a practice theoretical approach to explore the everyday social practice of record keeping by those outside the recordkeeping disciplines in a contemporary public sector setting and it is only one of a few comparative case studies of record keeping practices.

The findings show that there is no one accepted definition of record, rather what is considered a record will differ in each organizational setting. Each agency (or *site*) creates its own 'shared practical understanding' of records in their particular context. *Site-specific* cultural-discursive, material-economic and socio-political arrangements (the *doings*, *sayings* and *relatings*) actively shape records and record keeping practices and the various affordances of records emphasised in that site. Additionally, across the Australian public sector and records creators do not find the language of records management accessible or useful. Creators of records also have their own internalised thresholds which they use to make judgements about records identification and capture.

This study has demonstrated that records are active social practices, not simply passive and objective artefacts. Conceptualising records as social practices, in which humans and objects play an equal role, presents a paradigmatic shift for the recordkeeping disciplines that have privileged the artefact over the human elements of practices. The use of the practice theoretical approach provides a framework to produce significant and novel insights for researchers and practitioners in the recordkeeping disciplines.

