Workshop Curriculum Packet

Workshop on Records Storage Environment

Wisconsin Historical Records Advisory Board
Registers in Probate Association

With support from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission

Introduction

The origins of the project
In 1997 the Wisconsin Historical Records Advisory Board (WHRAB) began working on the Best Practices Project. Funding for the project was provided by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) an affiliate of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

The Best Practices Project helped three partner organizations establish best practices for historical records care. In addition to the Registers in Probate Association (RIPA), the project worked with the Wisconsin Council for Local History and the Wisconsin Association of Public Librarians. The first step for all three partner groups was to appoint a taskforce from the ranks of its membership. Seven Registers and one State Court Records Officer volunteered to participate in the Registers taskforce. Peter Gottlieb (WHRAB Deputy Coordinator) and Sally Jacobs (Project Archivist) met with this group three times between March and November.

At the first meeting, members of the Registers taskforce decided that what they needed most was simple, concise information on the proper storage environments for court records. The taskforce met a few months later to examine and discuss preservation information published in journals, books, and on the World Wide Web. Following this discussion, the group outlined the contents of the manual. Jacobs and Gottlieb drafted a rough version of the manual, which was discussed at the third meeting, along with the structure and content of the workshop on storage environment.

The products of the Best Practices Project were designed to become the property of the associations that helped to create it. With the presentation of the initial workshop by the Records Advisory Board representatives, the Registers in Probate Association will now be able to put on additional workshops with the help of this curriculum packet.

Contents of the Curriculum Packet
The contents of the curriculum packet includes:

A. Workshop Outline
B. Expanded Outline/Script
C. Overheads and Handouts

Workshop Outline

This workshop is based on the manual of best practice, "Everything You Wanted to Know About Storage Environment". The outline assumes a two-hour workshop. In the initial workshop, surveys were sent to the participants beforehand and the results were then discussed during the workshop. If there are time constraints which do not allow for a two-hour workshop, this component could be eliminated.

Part 1. Introduction - 10 minutes

Part 2. Short presentation of manual information - 15 minutes

- Using your manual
- Storage Environment 101
- The most important things you can learn today

Part 3. Q&A/Discussion of survey results - 25 minutes

BREAK - 10 minutes

Part 4. Group Exercise - 25 minutes

- Explanation - 5 minutes
- Group work - 20 minutes

Part 5. Reports from small groups - 25 minutes

Part 6. Conclusion/Wrap-up - 10 minutes

Expanded Outline/Script

Part 1: Introduction

- Summary of the above introduction describing the origins of the project.
- What participants should get out of the workshop, including:
    1. Recognize how environment can damage records
    2. Understand the basic preservation needs of paper, microfilm, and computer disks/tapes
    3. Be more aware of threats from fire, water, and security risks
    4. Have suggestions for improving your storage environments without breaking your budget

Part 2: Presentation of Manual

This next portion of the workshop consists of two parts: Using Your Manual and Storage Environment 101. In the first part, I will introduce you to the design and structure of the manual to help you to use it most effectively. In the second part, I will give you a VERY quick overview of storage environment including a list of common enemies and some common sense tips for improving conditions in your offices.

I. Using Your Manual
The Best Practices Taskforce worked carefully to make sure that the manual was

A. Easy to Use and Easy to Understand.

1) Inside, you will find tables of information and narrative explanations. That way you have quick at-a-glance reference sheets and more detailed explanations of the science behind records deterioration.

2) The manual uses non-technical language whenever possible. We also made sure that all technical terms have a definition in plain English.

B. Information is Organized by Type of Material

1) Storage environment affects different materials in different ways - so it made sense to organize this information by type of material: paper, microfilm, computer.

2) As you can see from this example, each table lists ideal storage conditions, explains potential damage, and describes what that damage might look like. The table is also divided by various environmental factors such as light and humidity that have a different affect on records. These "enemies" are listed in the far left column.

3) After each table is a more in-depth explanation of the structure of each type of material and its expected lifespan.

C. The manual also includes suggestions for Low Cost (and even no-cost) Improvements.

This section is organized by type of storage area: Rooms that contain both records and people, rooms located in your building that are solely for records, and off-site storage areas.

As you will soon learn, many of the things that make work spaces more pleasant for people (such as sunlight, plants, and food) can pose a threat to records. Compromise is the key in mixed areas, and rules can be more strictly enforced in records-only storage rooms.

D. The manual also includes several Appendices.

Helpful Resources: includes archival supply companies, and the names of contact people who can help you with questions.

Additional Readings: A bibliography for anyone who is interested in more in-depth information

Digitization Bandwagon: Many county boards are excited about the idea of digitizing all their records...without a clear picture of the underlying costs.

Emergency Management: The Registers taskforce was very interested in learning more about disaster recovery. Although this topic could be a manual on its own, we have included two articles from an organization called the North East Document Conservation Center.

II. Storage Environment 101

This next section covers a large amount of material in a short period of time. You are not expected to memorize all of these details!! (There's no quiz!) Everything I'm about to cover is available in your manual, but I want to give you the highlights so you will have a heads-up for the small group exercise we will have in a little while.

I'd also like to ask you to defer questions until the next portion of the workshop when we will discuss the survey results. Of course, don't hesitate to speak up if you are having difficulty hearing me.

"A controlled environment can dramatically extend
the usable life of the historical records in your care."

The "enemies" list you see on this overhead includes things you may never have thought of as enemies. All of these factors contribute to the deterioration of paper, film, and computer materials. I will go through these one at a time and describe the type of damage that can occur. I will also list a few simple, common sense things you can do to reduce that type of threat.

A. Light

- Fades inks and paper
- Darkens white paper
- Increases temperature which speeds up chemical processes that cause decay. An increase of 18 degrees Fahrenheit will double the rate of most chemical reactions.

Quick Tips:

- Use shades in mixed office / storage areas
- Block windows in storage only areas
- Use boxes, drawers, and doors

B. Temperature and Relative Humidity

- Heat increases the rate of decay
- High humidity encourages bugs and mold

- Low humidity makes paper and tapes brittle
- Unstable levels cause materials to shrink and expand — which then causes wear and tear

Quick Tips:

- Keep records away from radiators, direct sunlight, and water
- Stabilize temperature & relative humidity:
    - Don’t prop open windows or doors
    - Don’t "set back" the heat or A/C
    - Avoid unheated buildings (seasonal cycle)

C. Pests

- Records can be consumed (literally!)
- Droppings can damage records
- Pests can be a sign of other problems, such as high humidity or inadequate housekeeping

Quick Tips:

- Practice regular housekeeping
- Keep food and plants away from records as much as possible
- Keep windows and doors to the outside closed
- If you think you’ve got a problem, set traps to find out exactly what type of pest you have

D. Dust, Dirt, and Pollutants

- Stains paper records (permanent stains make records un-readable)
- Scratches microfilm (microfilm readers magnify small scratches, causing possible loss of information)
- Makes computer tapes unreadable
- Pollutants can accelerate the rate of decay

Quick Tips:

- Practice regular housekeeping
- Store records in folders and boxes —

    - You can create an environment within an environment by using archival quality boxes and folders. This smaller "micro environment" is easier and less expensive to control than an entire room or building.

- Keep windows and doors to the outside closed

E. Fire and Water

- Potential for complete destruction (ashes)
- Water damage causes warping and mold (leaks, floods, or fire hoses)

Quick Tips:

- Be prepared for emergencies (after is too late)
- Alarms: smoke and water
- Watch for leaks, drips, and stains
- Report all problems immediately
- Store records:
    - Off the floor (plastic pallets)
    - Away from pipes, sprinklers & radiators
    - Away from walls with condensation

F. Theft and/or Tampering

- Records can be removed or changed
- Reliability of legal records

Quick Tips:

- Don’t allow strangers in storage areas
- Lock storage areas (different key)
- Keep keys in a secure area

III. The Most Important Things You Can Learn Today:

A. Preserve only what needs to last

Preservation can be costly. Don’t spend resources to preserve records that only need to be retained for 10 or 20 years.

B. Always aim for the ideal

Ideal storage environments are the best way to make records last as long as possible. Always provide the ideal when you can. Never settle for compromises when you can afford something better.

C. Compromise when you have to

We also realize that "state of the art" storage facilities are so expensive that they are beyond the reach of most institutions. Keep in mind that it is always better to do something to improve conditions than to do nothing at all. MAKE SMALL IMPROVEMENTS!! This is a simple truth that I want everyone to understand.

Part 3: Q&A/Discussion of survey results

This part of the workshop assumes that the presenters have identified the participants and have been able to distribute the survey prior to the date of the workshop.

- Ask how many filled out survey.
- Presenter can ask about a particular aspect and then spin off a bit of information about it. For example, ask how many found a wet floor. Then talk about relative humidity.
- Presenter needs to be able to keep the discussion on track.
- Be ready with an alternate plan if no one has filled out survey. Have a list of environmental hazards that you have seen that pose a potential threat to historical records. Others will probably have similar experiences and begin to share them.
- Presenter should have an overhead ready in which to list the various storage conditions and concerns voiced by the participants.

Part 4: Group Exercise

The purpose of the group exercise is to give participants an opportunity for more intensive discussion of storage environment issues and to encourage them to bridge the gap between best practices (manual) and real conditions (survey data). Small groups should include from eight to ten individuals. Workshop participants should break into small groups to which you have assigned them during workshop planning. You can also simply ask participants to form small groups of 8-10 individuals who are all sitting in the same area of the room. Before breaking into small groups, be sure to lay the groundwork for good discussion among the participants. Ideally, there will be enough presenters to assign one to each small group as the discussion leader. If not, a discussion leader should be assigned to each group. The responsibilities of the discussion leader include:

1. Before the Discussion:
    - Brief introductions of group members if necessary.

- Review the time period.
- Ask for one volunteer to take notes and another one to report the group's decision.

2. Lead the Discussion:

1. Ask for opinions.
2. Encourage participation
3. Paraphrase a comment or summarize several comments.
4. Ask for clarification or examples.
5. Ask questions about the assumptions the group is making.

3. Keep the Discussion on Track:

0. Is there even participation?
1. Is the group staying focused?
2. Did I give the group a 10-minute warning?

After the ground rules have been laid, the group discussion can take place.

Discussion Topic

A good topic for the small group exercise is one that presents a fictitious but realistic problem which the members of each small group must collectively solve, by proposing general solutions or by creating an action plan.

Example of a Small Group Exercise Topic - Additional storage space has become available in the basement of your building. Your director/supervisor wants to know your priorities for preparing that space for records storage and tells you that there are some funds to use for adapting the space to hold records. How do you go about setting the priorities? What priorities would you submit to your director/supervisor?

A topic like this gives small group members a way to bridge the gap between the standards explained in the manual and the real conditions where they work (which they may have documented in a survey that they brought with them to the workshop). The topic for the group exercise should provide a way for small group members to address common concerns and develop specific solutions for problems. The topic which works best for the workshop depends on the types of offices or repositories where the workshop participants work and the kinds of storage environment problems they face.

Part 5: Reports from small groups

At the end of the small group exercise, all participants convene again as a single workshop audience. A member of each small group reports on the action plan or solutions that its small group came up with

during the exercise. This member can either be the leader or another member chosen by the leader or by the small group as a whole. The reports should be brief and focus on the specific steps proposed to solve the problem which the small groups discussed.

The workshop presenter should direct this report-back activity, encouraging questions from all participants and asking questions of those who are making the reports, in order to clarify the solutions or action plans each small group developed. As each report is made, the presenter can encourage a general discussion among participants about implications of different solutions being proposed, strengths and weaknesses of different approaches, and so forth. The presenter should use a blank overhead transparency or a grease board to list the highlights from the reports. These highlights can be the specific solutions most common in all the small groups' reports, the most innovative ideas, the proposals that illustrate what any records keeper could do to improve storage, etc.

Part 6: Conclusion/Wrap-up

Summarize the major issues brought up during the workshop, particularly during the group exercise. Thank the other presenters and participants and have them fill out an evaluation form.

Mechanics of the Workshop

- Make sure your overhead projector is working properly.
- Make sure that the speaker’s overheads are in the proper order.
- Place all the materials which you will be distributing to the participants at their seats prior to beginning the workshop.
- If possible, have someone assist the speaker in the placement and removal of the overheads.
- Prepare for the group exercise prior to the break so that when the participants return to the room they can move directly into their group.