

VÄITÖSLUENTO

Functional Classification Systems in Finnish Public-Sector Organisations

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Mr Custos, Mrs Opponent, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Have you ever lost a record, or maybe some document in your computer's file system? Do you recognise the feeling of frustration when trying to find it: you know it should be there somewhere but you cannot find it? In a hurry, you might just have put it anywhere.

The systematic organisation of information is necessary to keep things in order and to find them later. In particular, when several people handle the same subjects, for example records in an organisation, it is essential to have such a classification system that is understandable and usable for each of its users. Shared understanding of the logic used in organising things is definitely needed. Basically, classification,

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as such, is a common practice to people. We have classified almost everything. We classify things all the time, everywhere we go. We recognise various subjects based on their classification, based on the characteristics that fit in with what we have learned before. People classify all sorts of things to make them more comprehensible, understandable, accessible, manageable, and just to keep things in order. The whole world has been classified in groups and smaller pieces to make it all more straightforward for us. The logic used in categorising things in classes depends on the purpose we classify things for. We might, for example, want to focus on colour, shape or species.

Records serve as the memory of society. Society needs its history to identify itself, to acknowledge where we come from. Records also serve as evidence of our past and current actions. The way we handle our records today affects the way they are accessible in the future and the way future generations see the picture of our society. Records are created and received in the course of organisations' functions. Records produced by public-sector organisations as they carry out their functions often have substantial legal and societal significance. Public-sector organisations serve their citizens, that is, us. They perform functions such as education, health care services, and public transport. Most of the actions a public-sector organisation conducts are written down and documented in records. In Finland, we follow the principle of transparency with the Act on the Openness of Government Activities. People have the right to access public records, which obliges organisations to provide access, whilst protecting our privacy and ensuring records' appropriate storage. It is clear that records need to be preserved for later use or appropriately destroyed. They need to be found and accessed in line with their current and future use. To be accessible and easily findable, records need to be well organised.

In my dissertation study, I focus on one specific method of records organisation, that is, functional classification systems. My interest and attention in the study concerns the understanding, use, and problems of organisations' functions as a basis for records organisation. In the study, I approach the phenomenon from various angles; however, mostly from a recordkeeping professionals' perspective.

The study situates itself among the internationally growing number of studies focusing on archives and records management. Here, at the University of Tampere, archives and records management belong together with other information sciences, which focus on practices by which we process information. In these research areas, we study how to produce, seek, use, share, manage and organise information. The study was finished within the Faculty of Communication Sciences. I would say that the study certainly has close connections to archival science, too. The study does not have a perspective on, nor draws on traditions from, the field of history, as archival studies often have; instead, it is closely connected to the growing international

research area focusing on the multiverse of archives, records, and records management.

Internationally, archives and records management is a research field with various traditions. Even how we understand the basic concepts of archives and records varies in the international community. Basic research such as the study at hand, strongly contributes to the development of the research area locally as well as internationally. In this diversity of concept understandings and practices, I found it especially important to be specific with the concepts I used in the study. What then, to me and to my study, is a record? The International Organization for Standardization defines records as being “information created, received and maintained as evidence and as an asset by an organisation or person, in pursuit of legal obligations or in the transaction of business”. Hence, the form of a record, its physical construct, may vary. In today’s digital recordkeeping environment, records as we see them, take their shape and are constructed from bits every time we access them in any digital system. The characteristics that make a record a record are reliability, authenticity, integrity, and usability.

For usability, records must be findable, accessible, and understandable in both the present and the future. In recordkeeping, past, current, and future all entwine together. We need archives for evidential reasons and to see where we come from, we need efficient recordkeeping systems for today’s processes, and we need to be prepared for future needs. Then how should we handle the documented information of our actions to provide efficient services for today’s citizens? How should we organise records so they can be easily accessible today and in the future?

Various records’ classification methods have been developed and applied over decades and in various recordkeeping cultures. We may classify records based on various characteristics: based on their subject, the organisational structure, meaning which department had charge of the actions described in the record, or the function of the organisation, that is, in connection to which action the record was initially created. To be understandable later, an individual record received or created in an organisation definitely needs to be connected to other relevant records, and to the function it was originally created for. Today, records’ classification based on the functions of an organisation is the predominant method of records organisation internationally. By functional classification, records are systematically organised and connected together for their later interpretation and use. For the purposes of this study, a functional classification system is understood in the way it is defined by the National Archives of Finland, as “a list of an organisation’s statutory and supportive functions”.

Today, as said, a function-based approach to records organisation is widely applied internationally. However, previous studies focusing on functional classification systems show confusion in an understanding of the concept and, above all, use

of the system. As already mentioned, even basic concepts in the field of archives and records management, their definitions and understandings, vary internationally. Similarly, applications of functional classification systems in different recordkeeping cultures vary. Hence, despite their overall significance, findings revealed in previous international studies may not be generalised to our recordkeeping culture. I wanted to find out what the situation is with functional classification systems in the Finnish public sector environment. I was interested in finding out how functional classification systems are understood, how they are used and what they are like. Do recordkeeping professionals here struggle with the same issues as their colleagues abroad? Hence, current study was motivated by the lack of studies and clarity in understanding and use of functional classification systems in Finland. It is the first extensive study focusing on functional classification systems in this specific recordkeeping environment. The main aim of the study was to gain a better understanding of functional classification systems in Finnish public-sector organisations.

The study was situated so as to describe and analyse the global phenomenon of function-based records' classification in the less studied environment of the Finnish public sector. The thesis consists of four sub-studies published in scientific journal articles. The first study focused on recordkeeping professionals' conceptions of functional classification systems. The second study addressed the difficulties faced by recordkeeping professionals in functional classification systems' use, and how those difficulties were handled. The third study highlighted the recordkeeping professionals' perceptions of functional classification systems' users and use. The fourth study explored the labelling used in the functional classification systems that the recordkeeping professionals used in conducting their work.

To study the phenomenon in such a previously unexplored environment, I decided to start with those who are the closest to the subject, that is, recordkeeping professionals. Despite automation in many digital systems today, records in organisations' recordkeeping systems do not normally automatically connect to the appropriate functions. In most part, human intervention is still needed. There is someone who takes care of our records in organisations. In Finnish recordkeeping culture, that someone is a recordkeeping professional: a registrar, recordkeeping designer, or archivist, to mention a few. To find out how they perceive functional classification systems I decided to gain data for the study by interviewing them.

Interviewing people is interesting and at the same time sensitive work. Every little nuance in the situation may affect its outcome: the location of the interview, time slot, possible excitement and tensions. Each interview, each documented discussion, and story told, is yet valuable in conducting qualitative research. In my study, I mostly used qualitative analysis methods as typical in analysing interviews. In addition to interviews, I used the functional classification systems of the organisations where my interviewees worked as data to analyse the title wordings used in classi-

fications. Using several analytical methods gave a lot to the study. To conduct the final sub-study with a totally new analysis method was hard work but rewarding.

Many of my interviewees had had difficulties at some point in using the functional classification system. They had become frustrated when not knowing which class they should select for a record, or when they couldn't find a record because someone else had put it in another class that their logic said was right, or when trying to fit certain processes into the strict classification structure. There are so many different ways of organising things according to different people's logic, that there are no chances of ever finding a record if someone else has put it somewhere without an order being apparent. Even when there is a clearly structured classification scheme to follow, finding the most appropriate class for a record may, for several reasons, take a while. In addition to frustrating users, struggling with records classification also harms the efficiency of our administration.

Shared understanding of the functional classification systems used in Finnish public-sector organisations, as well as knowledge of the difficulties that people who use those systems face in conducting their duties, gives us a possibility to develop the systems further in order to better serve the administration today and the findability of our records in the future. Even an acknowledgement of the systems' issues provides relevant information about how they are used.

The study provides new knowledge about functional classification systems and their use in Finnish public-sector organisations. The findings are important in providing a portrayal of an internationally applied approach to records' classification in a Finnish context. By creating a wider view and understanding of functional classification systems in Finnish organisations, the study is of importance for record-keeping professionals in various positions. Also, detailed results of the study may assist various users of those systems.

Digitalisation has permanently changed the way we proceed with records. The constantly growing number of born-digital records necessitates us to a continuous development of systems for their effective handling. From a birds-eye perspective, the functions of the organisation provide a reasonable solution for records' classification. On a practical level, users face various difficulties with the functional classification system today. Public sector organisations serve citizens' needs. Each matter dealt with by a public-sector organisation should be handled smoothly and efficiently. In addition, each user of any digital recordkeeping system should be able to use it without unnecessary complications. Internationally, a growing number of studies focusing on users of various digital systems are evident.

Records which we systematically organise and preserve today will be available for future generations. The recordkeeping decisions that we make today dictate a memory trace for the future. The way we organise today's records defines the way people can read them in the future. Organisations' recordkeeping is an ensemble

where every little piece should work together to form a workable solution. Classification forms part of the ensemble. Relevant records that are well organised provide future generations with easy access to the reality we live today. Findings of the study show that at the moment, there are usability issues in functional classification systems used in Finnish public-sector organisations. Being aware of the issues identified in the study provides us with a point of departure from our earlier practice. We are now able to start thinking about if there is a need to change things.

Basic studies such as the one at hand are needed to build a foundation for future applied studies. In a practically-oriented area such as recordkeeping, the importance of new studies is especially noteworthy. After answering the what -questions, we now need to find out how. We need to find how to proceed with things further. To find the best way forward, I suggest close collaboration between practitioners and researchers. Initially, the study was conducted to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of functional classification systems. With the wider understanding and new knowledge gained, we are able to invest in developing things further. Wider studies focusing on the phenomenon are needed.

Finally, I, as a researcher, would say that the diversity and depth of archival science as an internationally growing field of study, deserves to be strengthened with new research. I surely hope that this study inspires others to conduct research in the field, with courage and ambition.

Thank you.