

Digital Information Policy and Management

A Proposal that the Ohio State University

through its

John Glenn School of Public Affairs¹

and

University Libraries

form a partnership with

The Ohio Historical Society

To Support the Work of the
Electronic Records Committee
Of the State of Ohio

David Landsbergen
Raimund Goerler
Robert Kalal

July 21, 2004

Background

The Electronic Records Committee (ERC) is an informal group of IT managers, lawyers, archivists and academics that develop suggested policy and best practices on electronic records for the State of Ohio. The ERC has no legal authority but hopes that its suggestions are adopted because they represent the best thought in Ohio on how to handle problems with which many state agencies have little experience. The ERC has worked on such issues as how agencies should handle requests for database information; how agencies can set up 'trustworthy' information systems so that digital information can be used in a court of law; and how agencies should manage email under the requirement that agencies maintain (electronic) public records.

The ERC has been successful. Its members have produced a number of reports and suggestions that have been adopted by other states and praised by various professional organizations.²

The ERC has been successful because it does not represent any particular state agency viewpoint's including that of the Department of Administrative Services (DAS), which has statutory oversight responsibility for IT planning and acquisition in Ohio. The ERC has also been successful because it has managed to incorporate the viewpoints of a wide variety of professions all of which must be represented if IT policy is to be truly responsive to state needs. Finally, the ERC has been successful because of the past leadership of the State Archivist who, as chair of the ERC provided support through his staff's efforts at the Ohio Historical Society (OHS). While most of the substantive work was done by a self-selected group of volunteers who were interested in the topic, the former ERC chair was also very successful in keeping the discussion on point and pushing the committees towards a resolution in the form of a policy or best practices statement.

The ERC is now at a crossroads. The State Archivist who created the ERC has resigned and joined Battelle Laboratories. The 'sponsoring' agency, OHS, has experienced severe budget cuts and is undergoing reorganization. As a result, one open question is whether the OHS will be able to provide administrative support to the ERC?

Since the ERC is now at a critical point in its history, various issues are now surfacing on what the ERC is and where it should be going. One concern is that local governments have limited representation on the committee; yet they too, are 'creatures of state government'. The State of Ohio needs to begin building an 'information infrastructure' to support state / local partnerships. Another concern is that the ERC has only anecdotal information on who adopts the ERC's suggestions; and if they are not adopted, why they are not adopted. Other members argue that the ERC needs to insure adoption by assuming formal authority so that its conclusions are binding or, are taken up by an agency, like DAS who can formally ratify them. Finally, there is a group that is satisfied with the work and fearful of losing the momentum already created by the ERC should the ERC do too much reengineering of its mission. They would like to continue to produce suggestions on how agencies should handle electronic information with no real change in how the ERC operates.

The John Glenn School as a Trusted, Neutral Competent Partner

We propose to the ERC that administrative support for the ERC be provided by the JGS at the Ohio State. JGS could provide support to the ERC while the State Archivist would continue to provide leadership and direction to the committee. We have also been able to secure university resources to fund graduate student assistance from the OSU's CIO office to help provide logistical and administrative support for the ERC's efforts.

Like the OHS, the JGS could gain credibility with the ERC members because it has no particular stake in a policy outcome. In addition, the JGS could provide the ERC with access to researchers at the Ohio Supercomputer Center and first class researchers in a Big Ten research university.

The JGS already provides 'secretarial support' to the Ohio City Managers Association (OCMA); helps administer the Ohio Certified Public Manager (OCPM) Program and has partnerships to provide training to the Ohio Municipal League and the County Commissioners' Association of Ohio. It also has conducted training and policy briefings for members of the Ohio General Assembly and their staff. During election years, it leads a consortium of five Ohio policy institutes in providing training for newly elected members of the General Assembly. The JGS could draw upon this experience, infrastructure and goodwill to provide logistical support to the ERC. JGS's network of contacts could also make it much easier to reach out to local government should that become a part of the ERC's mission. Finally, the JGS also has extensive and a long history of doing 'applied research' to government agencies.

What would it look like?

The tasks and responsibilities assumed by the JGS would look very much the same as those now provided by the OHS. Most of the substantive work is done by the subcommittees using electronic mail to comment on draft language suggested by the chair of the subcommittee or the members. Occasionally, a 'real' subcommittee meeting would be hosted by the OHS. Finally, the draft policy would be reviewed and voted upon by the committee as a whole; again, through posting documents on the website and with comments exchanged through email. The formal vote would take place, in person, at the OHS. Approximately, two – three topics would be covered per year and about the same number of meetings would be hosted by the JGS.

If administrative support would be moved to Ohio State, we would propose some additional activities and responsibilities. We would make an earnest effort to include local government officials or their representatives. Local government is the government that most citizens experience. Yet, beyond a few large cities and counties, most of Ohio's local governments have very little resources - technical, time or financial – to devote to researching these issues. By including local government, we extend the reach of informed policy suggestions, and, at the same time, include the concerns and needs of local government when making policy or best practice suggestions.

The JGS could also provide its research expertise in systematically researching whether the ERC's policies are adopted, why they are not adopted, the important issues that are emerging and the various options that are available to Ohio.

Opportunities

This is an excellent way for Ohio State to provide high profile research / service to the state. At the same time, by providing logistical support for the ERC, Ohio State gains a front seat to the many issues that will march through the ERC. It also gains access to organizations for the very ‘practical research’ that is central to the JGS mission. If the ERC would move towards more systematic research on identifying issues and determining whether and why its suggestions are implemented, the Ohio State could easily provide this service. The data and the analysis would be useful to both the ERC and Ohio State’s students and professors.

The issue of how well public records are provided to the public has reappeared in the public agenda. Given the likelihood that even more sophisticated information technology will find its way into government, one could guess that this issue will continue to gain public attention. The ERC will need to be ‘at the table’ to represent the interests of public organizations should the legislature choose to revisit this most critical component to ‘good government’.

State / Local relations within Ohio need to be improved. Information and information policy will be at the core of any effort to gain better coordination. The present proposal seeks to reach out to local government so that their needs and interests are represented.

¹ The Ohio State University School of Public Policy and Management and the John Glenn Institute at the Ohio State University have proposed to the university to merge their respective units. The creation of this unit is contingent upon the approval of several university bodies including the Board of Trustees.

² The Ohio ERC has been cited by the Cohasset Associates that runs the Managing Electronic Records Conference. The States of Kansas, Michigan, Nevada, Iowa, and Oregon and the Commonwealth of Kentucky have all created equivalent organizations based on the Ohio ERC model.