

## RECORDS MANAGEMENT IN THE KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AGE: THE NAMIBIAN CONTEXT

**Cathrine T. Nengomasha**

**University of Namibia, Department of Information and Communication Studies**

### **Abstract**

*Over the last decade organizations have attempted to transform themselves into knowledge – enabled operations that are able to tap into the intellectual capital they create, to help them learn and develop (Hughes 2003a). The question is what is the role of the records management profession in knowledge management? In answer to this question, Hughes (2003b) sees records managers as playing a key role in the management of knowledge. This paper looks at knowledge and knowledge management; information management, as well as related concept – e-sectors, specifically e-government, and the part played by records management in all these. The paper concludes that organizations should not just concentrate on formal, structured, internal data, leaving out the informal and unstructured external information that most decision makers require (Kim 1999). Most of this information is captured in records, and this is how records management becomes critical to the whole process.*

### **Introduction**

An understanding of the term knowledge is important in this discussion. Knowledge is: “The ideas or understandings, which an entity possesses that are used to take effective action to achieve the entity’s goal(s)” (University of Texas 1998). It may be recorded in an individual’s brain or stored in organizational processes, products, facilities, systems and documents. This explanation refers to tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge consists of subjective insights, intuitions and hunches. It is deeply rooted in an individual’s actions and experience as well as in ideals, values, or emotions. Explicit knowledge is codified and captured in records of the past such as libraries, archives and databases (Polanyi 1966). Hughes (2003a:119) states that “knowledge” should be understood as a combination of information and a context for that “information” and that contextualisation occurs once expertise and experience are added. An organization’s ‘ideas’ and ‘understandings’, ‘expertise’ and ‘experiences’ are mostly recorded in its records defined by Schellenberg (1996) as:

All books, papers, maps, photographs, or other documentary materials, regardless of physical form or characteristics, made or received by any public or private institution in pursuance of its legal obligations or in connection with the transaction of its proper business ... (Schellenberg 1996:16)

It is clear from the above that records are one of the knowledge assets of an organization and as a result their management plays a role in knowledge management. Facilitating contextualisation of an organization’s records and the information they contain is one of the aims of records and archives management hence the principle of *respect des fonds*.

Knowledge management is a “multi – disciplinary approach to achieving organizational objectives by making best use of knowledge” (cited in Hughes 2003a:119). It is the systematic process of finding, selecting, organizing, distilling and representing information in a way that improves an individual’s comprehension in a specific area of interest (University of Texas 1998). As Hughes (2003b:1) observed, “...knowledge management is at the heart of what records managers are doing everyday”. Records management controls the creation, maintenance, use and disposal of records so that the right records are provided to the right person at the right time.

### **Management of an organization’s knowledge assets**

Abell and Oxbrow (2001) refer to knowledge management as the first major trend to identify information and its management as a crucial element for organizational success. Knowledge management is a more recent “trend” than records management and information management, which have aimed for years to give the right information, to the right person at the right time, and yet organisations have taken to knowledge management more readily than they did with records management. This could have been caused by the fact that organizations consider computer based data and information more important than the rest of the information pertaining to an organization, not realizing that there are other sources of information equally important. The most effective knowledge management systems manage all information, regardless of medium and format. This includes records and therefore records management should be seen as an important aspect of knowledge management.

Records managers as well as other information professionals need to work closely with other professionals, to ensure the availability and sharing of tacit as well as explicit knowledge. Kim (1999) claims that knowledge management is a combination of information management, communications and human resources, and regards knowledge professionals as:

...the individuals in the knowledge centre who have the skills, training and know-how to organize knowledge into systems and structures that facilitate the productive use of knowledge resources. They include librarians, records managers, archivists, and other information specialists (Kim 1999:4).

Records management has not been accorded the recognition that it deserves, and many argue that the new information age has presented records management professionals with the opportunity to sell the profession and prove to organizations that good records management practices give organizations the competitive edge over their competitors. Hughes (2003b) suggests that records managers can show how organizations can use their own records to create knowledge and credentialise business activities, capturing the evidence of expertise directly, thereby creating knowledge.

Kim (1999:5) called upon records creators to participate fully in the knowledge process of identifying needs, acquiring, organizing, storing, distributing and using knowledge, as well as developing knowledge systems. They should not do this just as end users of knowledge services but also as active agents in every activity of the

knowledge management cycle. This way records creators get involved in the records management and knowledge-creation process. Involving records creators will make them understand the need to maximize the use of tacit as well as explicit knowledge through sharing, and this is best done through documenting all this knowledge. Many organizations do not “know what they know”. Documentation of what an organization knows is important to avoid costly duplication of effort and mistakes. However as Whitlock (1999:1) pointed out, “A company cannot compile a common pool of knowledge unless everyone involved agrees to and learns how to document what they know”.

The records management professionals have been called upon to take into consideration the new technology and how it affects the way they have been operating. They should take up the challenge of managing information, not only in documentation form but also in electronic form and human form. Sanderson and Ward (2003:3) describe some of the issues concerning business process-driven records management:

The value chain extends into the external consumer world, where information flow has become a two-way process, with information on products and services going out and customer information coming back to feed and change internal business processes. The importance of this information is often not recognized, so that its capture in records systems is neglected.

An organizational knowledge base cannot be complete without the availability and ability to share information. Records management professionals are therefore called upon to embrace technology and ensure that information technology professionals include records management in the systems, which they develop. As mentioned earlier, they can do this effectively by involving the records creators.

As with businesses and development of business processes, recent developments have seen governments move to electronic government (e-government). E-government refers to the use of information and telecommunications technologies to enable government to deliver its programmes and services more effectively and efficiently. It has the effect of improving internal processes as well as increasing the participation of citizens in their own governance (Lipchak and McDonald 2003).

Are government environments ready to capture information in electronic form and make it part of records their systems? Several writings suggest that there is still a lot to be done particularly in developing countries where even the most basic aspects of records management such as training of staff to keep track of records still needs to be addressed. However other types of constraints such as an enabling legal and regulatory environment magnify the challenges for developing countries.

It can be deduced from the discussion above that for most records management professionals who operate in environments where there are no proper records management practices, contribution to knowledge management is hampered and the situation is compounded by the introduction of electronic records. Braga (2002) sees the challenge to both developed as well as developing countries as basically the question of how to make the management of records particularly in the electronic

format, part of the broader concept of knowledge management. He sees this as requiring integration of technologies as well as the people who are working in information sciences.

### **Namibia's situation**

Interest in this paper emanated from research, still in its infancy, on records management and knowledge management in Namibia. The research aims to establish the status of records management in Namibia, including electronic records as well as the extent to which organizations have moved towards knowledge management. Electronic records and their effective management are "becoming especially critical as developing countries embark on e-government strategies" (Lipchak and McDonald 2003).

A few studies have been carried out in Namibia which explore the status of records management in the public sector, but as far as this author is aware, none on the private sector. Such studies include Barata and others (2001), Namibia Resource Consultants (2002), and Nengomasha and Amiss (2002). These studies seem to suggest that there is a lot that needs to be done to ensure e-records readiness in the public service. E-records readiness refers to the capacity to create, manage, share use and re-use electronic information and related technology to improve governance (Lipchak and McDonald, 2003). This electronic information, together with all other sources of information, make up an organization's intellectual assets. The Namibian Government has embarked on strategies towards a knowledge-based society. As Gurirab (2003:2) enunciated:

To produce in Namibia a knowledge-based society, critical for next generations, there must be active promotion of incentives, fostering of industries, financing for research and development and applying a myriad of economic, investment, patent, fiscal and technology policies and strategies to realise the objectives of Vision 2030.

Namibia's Vision 2030 recognises that knowledge, information and technology will play a significant role in Namibia's future development (Kaulinge, 2001). There is a significant growth in e-sectors such as e-commerce, e-banking, e-learning and e-government in Namibia (Stork and Aochamub 2003). The question to be addressed is, what is the extent of creation, identification, distribution, storage, retrieval, retention and protection of knowledge in Namibia? A framework that enables e-records readiness as well as knowledge management includes values, policies, standards, systems and people. In attempting to answer this question, the author will limit observations to the public sector, as mentioned earlier; the situation regarding the private sector still needs to be investigated. However, the fact that Government has been losing the few trained records and archives management professionals to parastatals and the private sector (Barata and others 2001:16) suggests a sizeable existence of records management in these sectors. It is the aim of the author that as the research progresses, its findings will provide an answer to the private sector situation as well.

Stork and Aochamub (2003:37) refer to e-government as “more than simply a government buying more computers and putting up a web site”. Government of Namibia has put up a website and the number of computers and computer-based systems has been on the rise. They discuss a number of issues that need to be considered concerning the opportunities that e-government offers. Two of these issues are law and public policy issues and records management. They argue that better information management helps officials to identify barriers to more efficient government and that the streamlining of off-line record keeping processes make the transformation to online publication easier. This call to improve records management practices in order to facilitate e-government augurs well for the development of records management and related fields such as information management and knowledge management.

An e-governance workshop held in Windhoek, Namibia in November 2002, which brought various stakeholders from both public and private sector, resolved that the management of the public sector records is weak and that though the Namibian Government has initiated a programme towards e-governance the full benefits of this will only be realized when improvements have been made in the management of recorded information. The status of records management in the public sector leaves a lot to be desired. Namibia Resource Consultants (2002:23) reported that:

Government registries are not functioning. They are manned by Grade 10 (an equivalent of three years of secondary school education) school leavers, too low for the competencies or skills required to effectively manage records. The resultant situation is that the action officers having very little regard for and confidence in these registry clerks set up their own ring binder system of storing paper documents in their offices or store information in their PCs, or assign their filing to private secretaries who have no training in this respect.

A records survey in one of the Ministries confirms this state of affairs. The survey observed a lack of records management system in place, with absence of the use of classification schemes, retention schedules, and systematic disposal of records resulting in heavy congestion of offices, and poor retrieval of information. Officers keep records in their offices which no one but themselves know they exist. Filing backlogs of a year or more were observed in one senior management office (Nengomasha and Amiss 2003). Namibia Resource Consultants (2002:25) reported that the extensive use of computers in Government to store information was “worsening the situation, as no policies exist for the management of electronic records”.

A study on the management of financial records in Namibia revealed weaknesses in the financial records management systems’ ability to manage financial records. “Although examples of good practices were found, overall, the management of electronic records by these systems was rated inadequate” (Barata and others 2001:7). Also coming out of the study was the fact that records, which exist in mixed media environment, require strong controls to protect them against unauthorized access, alteration, copying and destruction. However accomplishing this in the public service is very difficult as “the records management function as a whole has no presence throughout government” (Barata and others 2001:8).

In addition to poor records management, the challenges for developing countries as they move towards making the management of records, particularly in the electronic format, part of the broader concept of knowledge management are compounded by inadequate legal and regulatory environments (Braga 2002). In Namibia, there is an established legal and regulatory framework, which however, needs to be updated (Barata and others 2001:5). This includes:

- The Archives Act 1992, which is now out of date and requires revision to take into account the changes in the use of information technology. It is not clear at which point electronic data generated by a computer is deemed to be an electronic document under the terms of this Act.
- The Computer Evidence Act No.5 of 1992 provides for the admissibility in civil proceedings of evidence generated by computer. Section 2 refers to “Authentication of computer printouts”. Records managers can be guided by the clause of this act on how to ensure authentication of computer generated records by providing the right environment for their creation (Nengomasha 2003). However the law needs to clarify the admissibility of all electronic records not just computer printouts.

Stock and Aochamub (2003:38) support establishment of an enabling legal and regulatory environment and argue that e-government might encounter legal or policy barriers and urge the legislature to ensure that laws are updated to recognize electronic documents and transactions.

A move has been made towards the establishment of such an environment. An e-government policy is in the process of being drafted, and an Information and Communication Technology Policy for the Republic of Namibia has been in existence since 2002. As expressed by Stock and Aochamub (2003:38) there is need for the setting up of a strong body to implement this information policy and address a number of issues including the fostering of e-commerce, e-business, e-government and amendment of relevant laws.

## **Conclusion**

Records management and specifically e-records readiness in this age where governments are moving towards e-governance, are important in an organization’s ability to create, capture, organize and use knowledge. To enhance knowledge management in organizations, it is imperative that information technology specialists work in close cooperation with records management professionals to come up with records oriented approaches to knowledge management.

Namibia recognizes the competitive advantage that knowledge gives to an organization and as result strategies have been put in place to move towards a knowledge-based society. However Namibia is not yet e-record ready. There is a need to improve on records management practices as well as put in place a legal and regulatory framework that supports records management, e-government and knowledge management. Records management takes care of records and documents from which an organization draws its explicit knowledge. Thus records management contributes to the success of knowledge management.

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