RECORDS AND INFORMATION: THE NEGLECTED RESOURCE

Nathan Mnjama
University of Botswana, Department of Library and Information Studies
Email: MNJAMANM@mopipi.ub.bw

Abstract

The paper examines some of the issues facing public and private organizations in their efforts to manage records and information, and suggests that to a large extent many of these problems are due to the lack of policies and procedures, inadequate storage facilities and lack of well-trained and competent personnel. The paper suggests possible strategies for the effective management of recorded information whether electronic or in paper format.

Introduction

Records constitute a vital resource and are essential for the operation of organizations. There is no organization that can exist and operate without information. Yet despite the crucial role played by information, records continue to be neglected. As a result of the increasing day-to day activities of many modern-day organizations, records are being created in large quantities. The proliferation of records in electronic formats also poses a unique challenge for organizations to develop and adopt institution-wide integrated records/information management programmes. Information management is increasingly being perceived as a critical factor to the effective operations of modern organizations.

Information management (IM) has been defined by Aslib (2003) as:
> an imprecise term covering the various stages of information processing from production to storage and retrieval to dissemination towards the better working of an organisation; information can be from internal and external sources and in any format". Similarly records management is key to the effective and efficient organizational management. The same association defines Records Management as a component of Information Resource Management that deals with the creation, storage, retrieval and disposal of all format records (paper, electronic etc) where information resides.

These working definitions will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

Records or information continues to be a neglected resource in many parts of Africa. Since joining the profession in 1977, I have witnessed several cases of poor record keeping practices across the African continent and in Central America. Both private and public enterprises handle recorded information casually without realizing that information constitutes a major resource comparable to finance, human and equipment. The importance of managing records as a key strategic resource cannot be overstated. Increasingly many organizations have come to the realization that records management is an important tool which underpins the management of change process upon which modern management practices depend.

Records management is not only a tool for interpreting the past, but is also a vital component for predicting the future. The first time it dawned on me how records

have been neglected was in 1989 while attending a records management workshop in Ghana. Mr K B Asante, the then Secretary for Education of Ghana, commented on the state of record keeping in Africa saying:

> the major factor in gross inefficiencies and lack of continuity in the policies and procedures of many African Governments is not as is commonly supposed frequent changes in government but management of records. Often there is no records management at all.

Since then we have seen some progress being made in the management of records, but much more can be done to address this situation and especially as we move towards managing e-records which have come with their own challenges. It cannot be overstated that failure to manage records is a case of bad management. This is a view that is shared by Weisse (1986), a records and information management expert from America who argues that, "a failure to control information under one's control is not just a minor lapse or an insignificant concern, but a case of bad management" (Weisse 1986:32).

Records and information: the valuable resources

Lowell (1987), an Australian records expert opines that, "Government records have a unique character that imposes special responsibilities on the agencies that preserve and manage them". He goes further to say that "the value of state records derives from the information they contain and the evidence they provide. State records not only document past decisions, they often establish and protect current rights and responsibilities of both the government and the governed". He concludes that, "records provide a source of public accountability of how elected officials and the bureaucracy have carried out their public trust and the mandates of the citizenry".

Perhaps the best summary of the usefulness of records is that which is provided by Piggot (2002), a Senior Information Solutions Consultant with the Word Bank who says:

> without access to good records, officials are forced to take decisions on an ad hoc basis without the benefit of institutional memory. Fraud cannot be proven, meaningful audits cannot be carried out and government actions are not open to review.

There are several reasons in the context of good governance why governments need to manage and maintain records properly. According to Piggot (2002) some of these reasons are:

- Governments rely upon legislative records, court records, police and prison records to preserve the rule of law.
- Government relies upon policy files, budget papers, accounting records, procurement records, personnel records, tax records, election registers, property and fixed asset registers to demonstrate accountability to its citizens.
- The protections of entitlements depend upon pension records, social security records, land records, birth and death records.
- In providing services to citizens, a government needs hospital records, school records, and environmental protection monitoring records;
- In documenting its relationship with other countries, government needs foreign relations and international obligations treaties, correspondence with

national and international bodies, loan agreements, etc.

Without adequate records, the effectiveness of development projects cannot be ascertained. Moreover, there is no way of verifying that the development projects fall within acceptable legal, financial and cultural boundaries of a client government or that funds for development are used as intended.

Lack of records management is directly linked to the persistence of corruption and fraud. Experts in financial management control recognize and acknowledge the fact that well-managed records systems are vital to the success of most anti-corruption strategies. Records provide verifiable evidence to fraud that can lead investigators to the root of corruption. Well-managed records can act as a cost-effective restraint. On the whole prevention is much cheaper than prosecution.

The loss of control of records has consequences for all citizens, especially for the poorest who are least able to defend themselves. Relevant, accurate and complete public records must exist if governments are to preserve the rule of law and to demonstrate fair, equal, and consistent treatment of citizens (Piggot 2002).

Although records constitute a vital resource as indicated above, they continue to be neglected in many organizations. It is not only paper records that are neglected but electronic as well. Menkus (1989:488), a computer information expert, argues that the failure to treat information as a valuable asset partially stems from the fact that information is an intangible asset and most people find it difficult to envision information as an asset. Moreover, information as an asset would normally appear as an identifiable item in organizations' profit and loss statements or even in ledgers of assets. It can therefore, be argued that without easy and fast access to records, whether paper or electronic, it will virtually be impossible to uphold the principles of democracy, good governance, public accountability and transparency .

Records: the neglected resource

Surveys conducted by the author in Kenya, Botswana and from visits to Tanzania, Ghana, The Gambia, Sierra Leone, Guyana, Belize and many other countries reveal that the management of records is plagued by many problems. For instance in many of the countries surveyed, the following weaknesses were found:

- Poor layout of the records office especially where records are managed centrally.
- Untidiness in the records area, with records scattered all over the place, on the floor, on top of filing cabinets, along corridors and basements and carports.
- Regular loss of files and information. In many organizations it was common practice for senior and middle executives to spend considerable amounts of time searching for information which ought to be readily available. In some cases senior executives were unable to make informed decisions due to lack of information.
- Lack of file indexes or registers indicating the existence of the record in the organization. The absence of registers or inventories indicating the types of information resources held in the organization very often led to waste of time

in the gathering of information which already existed in the institution.

- Lack of control of file movements resulting in frustration of officers when files cannot be located easily particularly in cases where speed is essential.
- Lack of procedures for file closure. In many instances files which did not grow remained open for considerable number of years resulting in files which ought to be found in the records centres or at most at the archives still being held in record creating offices.
- Lack of retention and disposition schedules. As a result of these schedules, many organizations either failed to destroy records which were no longer needed to support day-to-day business operations or they were forced to take disposal decisions on *an ad hoc* basis without observing any specific disposal criteria.
- Poor file classification or no classification system or use of several classification systems in the same registry. Due to poor file classification systems, regular misfiling became part of everyday business resulting in misplacement of valuable data and information. This was even worse in electronic environments where files could be stored in different locations such as floppy disks, hard drives and network.
- Poor storage for semi-current records. The worst area where neglect of records was most evident is in the management of semi-current records. Visit any of the offices and you will discover closed files stored on top of filing cabinets, basements, corridors, garages, and in one hospital which I visited, in the mortuary!
- Poor supervision of records staff. It has been observed and particularly from discussions with the many records officers whom I have trained that there is hardly any meaningful supervision of records clerks. Perhaps the only time that the records officers are called to the offices of senior executives is when records cannot be located and they are summoned to be told of their shortcomings.
- Ignorance on the value of information, for instance, lack of security procedures in handling sensitive or classified information.

Even as we move towards the electronic age, the management of paper records as well as e-records continues to be neglected in many public as well as private enterprises. Studies conducted by the International Records Management Trust, a non-governmental charitable organization based in the U.K. have revealed various impediments to the management of both paper and electronic records. These include (International Records Management Trust 2003:5):

- Absence of organizational plans for managing e-records.
- Low awareness of the role of records management in supporting organizational efficiency and accountability.
- Lack of stewardship and co-ordination in handling paper-based as well as e-records.
- Absence of legislation, organizational policies and procedures to guide the management of both paper and electronic records.
- Absence of core competencies in records and archives management.
- Lack of appropriate facilities and environmental conditions for the storage and preservation of paper as well as electronic records.

- Absence of dedicated budgets for records management.
- Poor security and confidentiality controls.
- Lack of records retention and disposal policies.
- Absence of migration strategies for e-records.
- Absence of vital records and disaster preparedness and recovery plans.

Reasons for managing records as a strategic resource

There are several reasons why organizations ought to manage their records as a key strategic resources, namely that:

- Records themselves are organizational assets because they document organizational activities and are needed for audit trails, especially in establishing who did what, why and when.
- Records document financial activities. Without records, meaningful audits cannot be carried out, fraud cannot be proven, and those responsible for the financial management of the organizations cannot be held accountable for their actions.
- It is costly to create, maintain and even to dispose of records. Very many organizations appreciate that the collection and management of information costs considerable amounts of money. Peter Mazikana, an information expert from Zimbabwe, argues that apart from personnel costs, the management of records involves additional costs in facilities such as rents, supplies obtained for processing the information such as computers, printers, scanners, paper, pencils, maintenance costs for the equipment used in the processing of information, transport and travelling expenses incurred in sourcing, verifying, correcting and delivering information, and in the training of those responsible for the collection, storage and retrieval of information (Mazikana 1999: 18-19).
- Records are a critical means by which organizations maintain accountability to the public.
- The disposition and selected preservation of records in many countries is governed by law such as the National Archives Act, the Auditor General Act, Employment Act, the Statutes of Limitation, Pension Regulations, etc.
- Disaster plans and recovery plans are needed to protect records that are vital to the continuing operation of the organization in a time of crisis.
- International Standards Organization (ISO 15489) and other international best practice require the maintenance of records. [1] For instance, Botswana Meat Commission, which is the main outlet for export of meat products from the country, was forced to adopt ISO 9000 records keeping requirements in order to retain its share of the meat products in the Western markets (c.f. Mnjama 2000).
- Finally but not least, there is urgent need to manage records and particularly e-records which are vulnerable to many dangers. The technology used in the creation, storage and retrieval of e-records continues to change fast (almost every five years) and unless mechanisms are in place to ensure their capture and storage or migration into more stable mediums that can be accessed over a long time, we stand to lose this information.

Strategies for managing records as a resource

The greatest need in modern-day organizations is how to develop strategies for managing records as strategic resources for competitive advantage. As indicated above records underpin good governance and are reliable tool for maintaining public accountability and transparency. The effective management records management programme must begin with a records survey and must be supported by well-defined policies and procedures, a well-structured infrastructure, adequate resources and a team of well-qualified and competent staff. Each of these issues is discussed in detail below.

The information audit/records survey

Whether an organization is embarking on a records/information management programme or it simply intends to improve its existing one, the starting point for any such activity is an information audit which Aslib defines as

> a systematic examination of information use, resources and flows, with verification by reference to both people and existing documents, in order to establish the extent to which they are contributing to an organisation's objectives in an organization (Aslib 2003).

For those orgaizations that might not be ready to undertake a full information audit, they should nonetheless conduct a records survey or inventory. The records survey should be carried out with a view to answering all or most of the following questions:

- What records/information exist and in what quantity?
- In what formats are the records/information contained?
- What is their growth rate?
- What proportion of this information is needed to support day-to-day operations of the organization?
- How does the information flow within the organization?
- What proportion can be destroyed?
- Where are the records stored?
- What kind of facilities and equipment are required?
- Where and when will these facilities be required?
- Who manages the records?
- Are there any organization rules and regulations regarding the retention and destruction of records?
- What types of filing and retrieval systems are used? Do they follow the orderly systematic flow of records and information throughout the life cycle i.e. current- semi-current – non-current? [2]

Without this information, it will be virtually impossible to plan for the records information management programme. The information gathered at this stage can be utilized to develop retention schedules, identify vital records, identify records in danger and needing immediate attention, justify the appointment of an a records/information officer, etc.

The records /information management policy

The effective and efficient management of records must be supported by an infrastructure of policies, structures, procedures, tools, training and resources. It is for this reason that the records and information management function of the organization must derive its authority from a policy statement or charter issued by the organization administration setting out the objectives and mapping out the plan for the programme. Ideally, senior management should approve this policy statement. The policy should specify the rationale for the programme, the objectives, the proposed structure of the programme and the level of administrative and technical support required. The policy statement should clearly state that:

- All records/information created or received by the organization belong to the organization.
- All official records must be incorporated into the organization's records/information system. Private or individual record/information systems will not be allowed.
- Records/information must not be destroyed without proper authorization from the appropriate officers appointed by the organization.
- The organization's Records/Information Centre will be the depository for all organization records and information.
- The organization Records/Information Manager shall be the established official responsible for all aspects of records/information management from creation to their ultimate disposition.
- Access to organization records/information shall be subject to regulations formulated and approved by the organization.

In addition, the organization leadership should clearly define the scope of its records and information management programme. Traditionally, records/information management programmes were dealt with separately from the Information Technology Section. However, today with the proliferation of e-records in virtually all aspects of management, there is need to re-examine the role and functions of the records/information programme *vis-a-vis* the Information Technology Programme. Some harmonization and collaboration between the two sections should be developed to ensure that e-records are also captured into the records /information management programme of the organization.

There are various reasons why the organizations should formulate such a policy. In the first instance, resources must be allocated for running the organization's Records/Information programme. Secondly, the establishment of the post of the organization Records/Information Manager and other support staff, the training of staff and development of records retention schedules must be approved by the organization. Thirdly, as major records are created at the higher levels of organizational leadership, it is important that the chief officers of the organization should be bound by a policy on records/information management. Moreover, as the creation of the organization's Records/Information Centre will have far-reaching implications on the way records/information are maintained and used throughout the organization, a policy would help to ensure a coordinated approach to managing records throughout the organization.

The organization records/information centre

In many organizations, the responsibility of managing organization archives has been left to individual officers. The need to establish a centralized storage facility for the storage of records in the organization cannot be overstated. In some other organizations, the records of organizations remain unmanaged, though the organizations recognize the need to establish units for managing organization records. The creation of the organization Records/Information Centre should be one practical step towards the establishment of an effective organization records/ information management programme.

Among other things the centre should do is to collect, organize, appraise, preserve and make available records of the organization. Specifically the Records/Information Centre should:
- Provide information services and finding aids that will assist in the retrieval of information from the records both paper and electronic.
- Establish procedures and guidelines for the systematic collection and disposal of the organization's records.
- Prepare registers, calendars, inventories, guides, pathfinders and databases to facilitate the retrieval of information from the centre.
- Make available and encourage the use of the collection by members of the organization, community and the general public.

Appointment of an organization's records information manager

In order to ensure that recorded information is accessible and can be managed throughout the organization, it is essential that a Records/Information Manager is appointed to take direct responsibility for the records/information management system. It would be futile for the organization to embark on an organization-wide records/information management programme without a trained records information manager. No wonder Simpson (1975:22) advises "do not embark on a sea of records management with an inexperienced navigator". Ideally, the person appointed to this post should be educated to Diploma/Masters level in Records/Information management and should have the ability to work methodically and reliably.

Depending on the size of the organization, the Records/Information Manager must be supported by a team of well-trained officers at appropriate levels. It is expected that the duties of the Organization Records/information Manager will be to:
- Plan and administer the Records/Information Management programes.
- Compile publish guides and other retrieval tools to organization's records.
- Devise procedures for the listing, scheduling and destruction of organization records no longer needed by the institution.
- Regulate the conditions under which researchers may use organization's records and information (including the provision of information under the Promotion of Access to Information Act 2000 as in the case of South Afirca).
- Design and implement new file classification systems for the organization.
- Developing standards and filing procedures for records in the organization.
- Maintain records storage facilities.

- Develop efficient records retrieval systems for records transferred to the organization Records/Information Centre.
- Protect the organization information assets including document repair, restoration and reformatting (or migration of information to other formats).
- Identify and store appropriately vital records of the organization that might be needed to sustain the operations of the organization during and after a disaster.
- Prepare disaster and response plans for organization records/information.

Publicizing the records management programme

Although the formulation of a records management policy and the appointment of a Records/Information Manager is a critical step in the establishment of the organization's Records/Information Management programme, there must be a method of publicizing the programme and enforcing it. The new programme will require advertising and promotion to get it underway. Saffady (1974:208) argues that:

> the advantages of a well planned records management programs are familiar to most archivists but never cease to amaze organization officials who continue to view an organization archives as curios. A records management programme will never develop fully without appropriate publicity that clearly delineates the advantages of a sound programme for the administration of institution operating records and the role of the organization archives in that programme.

Coordination and cooperation from those presently holding all sorts of records is important. Moreover, the interest of potential users must be aroused and maintained through an effective and efficient records service.

The records/information service may be publicized through a newsletter or a circular originating from senior management in the organization. The launching of the programme itself should be followed by courtesy calls to all the major officers of the organization, exhibitions, etc. All these activities will require the support of senior management.

Appointment of a records/informationmManagement committee

One way of gaining support for the records information management programme is through the creation of a committee specifically charged with the responsibility of initiating the programme. Ideally the membership of the committee should consist of representatives of all the Departments/Sections/units. The committee should ensure that the organization Archives pursues the objectives and policies set in the policy statement and that it has the resources to do so. Initially, the main function of the committee should be to approve measures designed to set up the Records/Information Management programme. The committee should be responsible for the formulation of organization - wide records/information policies and procedures. Once the programme has been launched, the specific functions of the Committee may include: approving manuals and other publications prepared by the records office, approving retention/disposition schedules, compiling and revising search room rules and regulations, hearing appeals from the researchers as far as

access to records is concerned, assisting and communicating key problems or issues relating to the effective operation of the Records/Information Management programme in the organization.

The budget

Many Records and Information Management programmes fail to realize their desired goals due to inadequate funding. Any organization contemplating to establish a Records/Information Management programme must be prepared to provide the necessary funding to support the programme. No wonder, McCarthy (1975:7) argues that, "poorly or inadequately supported programmes have debilitating effect on staff morale, on the organization's image and most important on the use of historical materials". Funds will be needed for purchase of specialized storage equipment, payment of staff salaries, restoration facilities, maintenance costs, consumables such as diskettes, archival boxes, insurance, acid free papers, etc.

Access policy

An important component of the Records /Information Management relates to the manner in which its records are accessed by the members of its organization and the public as well. The establishment of an access policy is crucial especially under the new Promotion of Access to Information Act, 2000 in South Africa. Below are some suggested guidelines on access to organization records and information.

- Access to records held by the organization Records/Information Centre should be subject to regulations approved by the highest organ of the organization. The regulations should be reviewed from time to time.
- A department/section/unit depositing records with the organization's Records/Information Centre may impose limitations on access to their records so long as these limitations are not contrary to the general regulations approved by senior management.
- Each Department/section/Unit etc transferring its records to the Records/Information Centre will have access to its records either by withdrawing, borrowing the records themselves or by requesting a photocopy.
- Where appropriate a department/section/unit may request that some of its records be closed for periods in excess of the period approved by senior management.

Procedures for records transfer to the records/information centre

In order to affect the smooth transfer of records from the offices to the centre, it is suggested that some documented procedure be established. Below are simple guidelines which have been prepared for those who are unfamiliar with records transfer procedures.

1. Records that are not frequently refered to by the office of origin should be transferred to the Records/Information Centre.
2. Before the records can be transferred to the Centre, they should be arranged according to original file reference numbers. Where reference numbers are not available, the records may be arranged chronologically, alphabetically or by subject. Records may also be arranged in the format in which they are e.g.

maps, disks, etc.

3. Once the records have been arranged as in (2) above they should be listed in the Record transfer list indicating the original reference no, the file title, the covering dates of each item and any other relevant information useful for the identification of the record transferred to the centre. The list should also contain any access restrictions that might have been imposed on any of the transferred items.

4. All boxes should be labeled clearly prior to their transfer to the Records/Information Centre.

5. The retention period for each type of record should be indicated in the Records Transfer List. The aim will be to identify records of permanent value, establish realistic retention periods for records of only temporary value and to destroy such records upon the expiry of their retention periods. Where records have no agreed retention periods, under no circumstance should they be destroyed until the disposal has been authorized by the organization Records/Information Officer.

6. Two copies of the Records Transfer List should always accompany records transferred to Records/Information Centre — one copy will remain in the Centre as a reference copy and the other copy should be returned to the Department/Section/Unit as receipt of items in the Centre.

Conclusion

This article has established that records continue to be a neglected resource in many organizations. It has noted the contribution of records towards good governance, public accountability and transparency. Moreover, the paper has identified the major elements necessary for initiating a records/information management programme which includes the development of policies, procedures and programmes. It is hoped that this paper has generated interest among the participants to the level that they will be in a position to embark on their own records/information management programmes.

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Endnotes

1. A number of standards have been developed which make reference to records management requirements. These include ISO15489/1 (2002) which defines basic requirements for the management of records regardless of the format. It also analyses records management processes in terms of the life cycle. Others are the National Archives of Canada Information Capacity Check Model (IMCC) and the European Commission Model for the Management of Electronic Records (MoReq).

2. For details of how to conduct an information audit see Tali, M & Mnjama, N. M. 2004. Information audit at the Southern African Development Co-operation. (Forthcoming in *Library Management*).

3. This paper is a reworked version of a paper presented at the Access Information Management Services Conference on Information Management in a Democracy: Supporting Access, Security and Accountability Through Sound Records Management Practices, 18-21 May 2003, South Africa, Kruger National Park.