MANAGEMENT OF ELECTRONIC MAIL:
A CHALLENGE FOR ARCHIVISTS AND RECORDS MANAGERS
IN BOTSWANA, NAMIBIA AND SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

While the use of electronic mail (e-mail) is common in most government agencies, there seem to be no proper systems and procedures in place for the systematic capture and management of this format of records. A study I carried out in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa, which forms part of my PhD thesis, found that most government agencies in Botswana and Namibia do not have policies that guide the creation and management of e-mails whereas these exist in South Africa. This article looks at the use of e-mail in government agencies and how the records generated are handled. Further, the article argues that archivists and records managers need to be seriously involved in advising record creators on proper capture and management of records generated by use of e-mail systems as these form an important part of the organisations' recordkeeping system.

Introduction

Governments, particularly those in developing countries, are becoming increasingly dependent on the use of information and communication technology (ICT)[1] and are now using various ICT systems to support their business. The processes involved range from simple

word-processing and electronic mail (e-mail)[2] to integrated document management and geographic information systems. Most importantly, the use of ICT has generated electronic records[3] and these will continue to increase as more government activities are computerised. In addition, greater reliance by organisations on electronic mail systems as a primary business application has become a producer of large amount of records. In spite of this, most organisations in government lack integrated systems for the management of e-mails. Without concerted efforts to deal with the management of e-mails, government agencies in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa will lose significant public records, including those that make up their cultural heritage. This is necessitating demands for archivists and records managers in the three countries to be actively involved in facilitating the proper management of e-mails as part of organisational recordkeeping systems. This article explores the challenges that archivists and records managers in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa are facing in their efforts to take up the challenges of managing electronic records and in particular e-mails.

The challenges associated with the management of electronic mail

Electronic mail systems are now widely used applications in most organisations. However, studies concerned with the use of ICT and the management of electronic records have found that e-mail use is associated with many problems which if not addressed can lead to great risks for organisations. Vito Baggiolini, Mira Ramluckun and Eduardo Solana have argued that e-mail service lacks reliability; messages are delayed; erroneously refused by the destination system or in some cases lost. (Vito Baggiolini, Mira Ramluckun and Eduardo Solana 1994) Use of e-mail has also raised a number of complex records management issues. For example, there are questions of when an e-mail message is part of an official record? How easy is it to deny receipt of a document processed electronically and possibly never printed? In the United States of America (USA), the White House found itself facing problems after staff deleted e-mail messages of the Republican Party which had information on firings of USA top officials. Some of the documents which were deleted formed part of government records and were to be preserved for future reference. Following this, the Democratic Party is now putting

pressure on the White House to produce the original documents as they are needed as evidence to establish if the firings were politically motivated. This example shows how important it is to have polices in place to guide the capture, use and management of e-mail communication in organisations.

It follows from this that the administration of e-mail systems is complex and, therefore, requires expertise in e-mail standards, networking and operating systems and most importantly consideration for the management of the records generated. Electronic mail systems have to be managed because the records they generate form part of organisation's evidence. Baggiolin, Ramluckun and Solana have shown that it is possible to design management application systems for e-mail. The authors have in fact developed a prototype centred around the Distributed Manganese Tree (DMT) which monitors a large part of the operational e-mail service. This has been successfully implemented at the University of Geneva. In most organisations, however, it appears that the challenges of managing e-mails as records are of little concern to computer specialists. This means that the responsibility remains a concern for archivists and records managers whose role includes the management of all public records regardless of their format. Archivists and Records Managers have a larger role for information flow in organisations, and to perform this role they have to understand the nature and applications potential. The evidence from Botswana, Namibia and South Africa as presented next will show that in the southern African region, a lot still has to be done to equip records professionals with the skills to take up the challenge of managing e-mails and other forms of electronic records. Without adequate provision of resources and infrastructure for the management of these records, there will be no transparency and accountability, thus undermining governance process in the electronic age. The continuing growth in number and complexity of computerised information systems in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa, therefore, creates a significant need for strategies that will ensure the proper management of electronic mail systems in these countries.

Scope and methodology

This article examines the challenges faced by archivists and records managers in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa in addressing the management of e-mails in government agencies. In doing this, the article uses some of the data collected by the author between 2003 and 2004 as part of the doctoral work on the management of electronic records in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa. The data was collected using a questionnaire supplemented by interviews. The questions asked mainly focused on current recordkeeping practices in government agencies and availability of policies and procedures for the management of electronic records including e-mails. The data used was collected from archivists, records managers, records users, and IT specialists in government agencies.

Presentation of data on the management of electronic mail in government agencies in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa

Records managers, records users and archivists from government agencies in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa were asked if they had any polices for the management of official e-mail communication in their agencies. Some of the respondents felt that the question was an interesting one and that they had never really thought about it. Different viewpoints were expressed on how e-mail use was regulated and how resulting messages were managed. Responses from Botswana indicated that while use of e-mail was a common and easy way of communicating with other departments and stake-holders, there was no organisational policy on its management. Although the respondents said that all staff had to use official e-mail accounts for official communication, on visiting the offices, it was found that some had private accounts which they were using for official communication.

When asked about the storage and management of the official e-mails received through those private accounts, they indicated that there was no policy regulating this. Users were left with the responsibility for managing the e-mails they created. However, the respondents said that in most cases the procedure was that official e-mails with attachments would be printed, filed under relevant subjects and managed like other paper records. Where attachments were not

printed, cross references to paper records of related subjects would be made. Some responses from Botswana indicated that the management of e-mail communication was the responsibility of the Department of Information Technology. On the whole, respondents from Botswana felt that the issue of e-mails would be addressed once policies and procedures for the management of electronic records are in place.

As it was the case in Botswana, responses from Namibia showed that there were no management systems for e-mails created. However, respondents from the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and Public Service Information Technology Management (PSITM) unit in Namibia said that they had a policy on acceptable use of information technology (IT) resources including use of e-mail. Through this policy, staff were advised on proper use of e-mail for official communication. Staff from OPM, however, expressed concern that when staff were on official trips abroad the tendency was to use private e-mail accounts like yahoo and hotmail. This made management of official messages generated using these private e-mail accounts very difficult as it remained with individual users.

Asked the same question, all respondents from South Africa reported that their agencies had official e-mail accounts for official communication. This was found to be a major way of communicating with stakeholders. The Departments of Justice (DoJ) and Public Enterprise (DPE) pointed out that they were strict about use of e-mails and had come up with policies to help manage this. These policies were, however, not made available at the time of the author's visit to South Africa as they were said to be in their draft stages. For DPE, the IT unit was responsible for management of all e-mails, which were kept in the server for a certain period of time and deleted as necessary. A records manager from DoJ, however, emphasised that they treated e-mails as part of all records and as such were managed in the same way. With the new Electronic Communications and Transactions Act (ECT) in South Africa, the respondent reported that e-mail had become important and could now be legally accepted.

Analysis of findings related to the management of e-mails in government agencies in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa

It has emerged from the data presented in section 4 that the use of e-mails is becoming a common way of communication in government agencies in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa. This means that the use of e-mails is also contributing to increased generation of records. In addition, web-sites and instant messaging are emerging as potentially large producers of records which will have to be managed. A 2006 study by TOWER Software revealed that the use of e-mail is a major source of corporate memory and forms evidence of business processes, making it a vital source of evidence (TOWER Software 2006:16). In spite of this, most government agencies visited during the field research, particularly in Botswana and Namibia, appear to have no clear policies in place for the management of e-mail communication. Responses from Botswana and Namibia, as reported in section 4, confirmed this situation. In Botswana e-mail policies do not seem to exist in agencies visited; even if they did, the respondents appear not to have been aware of them. In fact, TOWER software has argued that in most organisations, staff are unaware of the existence of organisational e-mail policies (TOWER Software 2006:16). In Namibia, IT policies that address the management of e-mail exist in some agencies. For example, OPM and PSITM both have IT policies that address e-mail communication. However, the effectiveness of the available policies on the management of e-mail in Namibia appears not to be felt, as most respondents seem not to be aware of their existence.

South Africa, on the other hand, had e-mail policies in place in the government agencies visited. Respondents knew of the existence of these policies and followed the guidance which they gave. In fact, as part of South Africa's National Archives and Records Service's (NARS) strategies for managing electronic records, the Integrated Document/Records Management Solutions (IDRMS) recommended by NARS provides for the management of e-mails and web-sites as records. This appears to have been boosted by the existence of the Electronic Communications and Transactions (ECT) Act of 2002, which recognises electronic communications. The Electronic Communications and Transactions Act in South Africa has been a major development. The Act has encouraged the use of electronic records,

digital signatures for authentication, and confidentiality of personal information. Botswana and Namibia need such an act to provide legal certainty and confidence in relation to electronic transactions and communications. The two countries might need to consult with South Africa, which has been successful in developing its own legislation. In fact, South Africa seems to have followed the European model because the provisions of its act are similar to the requirements set out in the European Directive on a Communications Framework. This clearly indicates that South Africa was drawing on experiences from elsewhere and indeed the other two countries could do the same.

The fact that Namibia and South Africa have e-mail policies provides a contrast with Botswana, which has none. Generally, it appears records officers in all three countries view e-mails as constituting records, and as such think they have to be properly managed like other records. Clear policies on this have to be put in place to help guard against unlawful destruction of these important government records. The policies should also address how official e-mails created using private accounts like hotmail and yahoo are to be handled. Users should be discouraged from using private e-mail accounts for official communication and stiff penalties set for those who break the rules.

If users are left with the responsibility of managing the e-mails they create, the chances are that they would delete all the records once they felt they no longer needed them. The implication of this would be the destruction of important records, which may have future value to the operations of government. Even if some agencies like the Department of Public Service Management (DPSM) in Botswana and the Office of Ombudsman in Namibia are printing and filing such records, there is no guarantee that this will always be done, as no follow-up measures are in place to reinforce this. Unless policies are put in place, this trend will continue in the future. At the moment, it appears that government agencies in Botswana and Namibia are still waiting for policies for the management of electronic records to be provided by their national archives, which they hope will include procedures for the management of e-mail. Government agencies in the two countries should develop e-mail policies now. This might be possible, as in other countries, many organisations have standard e-mail policies. For example, in the United Kingdom a number of

organisations have policies that prohibit individuals from allowing anyone else to send e-mail using e-mail accounts they have been given by their employers. These polices clearly state that attempting to disguise the e-mail address from which a message is sent or the identity of sender is unauthorised. According to the Goldsmith's College (University of London) e-mail policy, users should be aware that "in responding to requests for information under the Data Protection and Freedom of Information Acts, the College may be obliged to disclose the content of e-mail correspondence held on College mail servers, irrespective of whether the sender or the recipient has deleted the message from local inboxes. In such circumstances, the rights of senders and recipients of e-mails to privacy have to be balanced against other legal requirements which may apply in the context of particular messages.

It appears that individual ministries and departments in Botswana and Namibia have no integrated management systems for e-mails created in government. Further, there is no or little inter-ministerial interaction and less consultation across the agencies and management of e-mail appears to be done on an ad hoc basis. This has led to lack of standardisation, such that even if systems are put in place for the management of e-mails, it is likely that they would not be integrated across agencies.

Botswana and Namibia need to work on their archival legislation to make provisions for the regulation of e-mail use and management of electronic records generated. The approach pursued in the UK could be used as a learning example. In the UK plans are at an advanced stage in developing new legislation that will replace the Public Records Act of 1958 that was passed when most government records were paper-based (The National Archives (UK) 2003). The new act is expected to provide for the management of digital records, including e-mails, and provide for their long-term preservation. This follows increasing demands generated by the spread of electronic record-keeping.

It is, however, worth mentioning that Botswana, Namibia and South Africa have embarked on formulation and implementation of ICT policies although these are at different levels. While this tends to vary from country to country, policy reforms in each of the three countries

seems to be advanced. These policies will be important as it is upon them that the supporting infrastructure for use of ICT is based. Policies provide a strategic framework for directing and shaping use of ICTs as they include decisions, guidelines, laws, regulations and other mechanisms.

Forging the way forward

It has emerged from this paper that it is difficult to manage e-mails and monitor their use because of their informal style and the absence of policies on their management. Most existing organisational e-mail policies seem to concentrate on regulated use to prevent abuse and not on the management of resulting records. This study recommends that the policies to be developed by the national archives in Botswana and Namibia should accommodate the management of e-mails. These policies should clearly state how the e-mails are to be disposed of or captured in the organisations' recordkeeping systems. Users must be made aware of these policies and strict measures put in place for adherence. This will ensure that e-mails are properly managed and that they fit within the organisations' decision-making process. However, it is important that the national archives work closely with other agencies such as IT departments, to ensure that the uniform policies they have on management of e-mail are observed in terms of information security and strict business use.

Conclusion

The problems experienced in the management electronic records including e-mail communication systems will continue to grow as the technology changes. As this article has shown, these will require archivists and records managers to work with computer specialists to come up with new solutions to meet the immediate and future needs of managing e-mails. It has emerged from this article that while Botswana and Namibia need clear polices for the management of e-mails in government agencies, South Africa has developed such policies. Further, the importance of developing e-mail policies to enable proper management of electronic records generated has emerged as a significant factor. In addition, policies for the management of e-mails to ensure that they are captured in the organisation's recordkeeping system and are managed and preserved like other

records, has been realised as a necessity. Most existing organisational e-mail policies seem to focus on regulating use and fail to provide measures that guarantee the capture and proper management of e-mail messages generated.

References

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E-mail and e-data interchange: challenges to records management. [Online]. Available WWW: http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3691/is_199410/ai_n8716187 (Accessed 24 January 2007).

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Interview with the Analyst Programmer, Ministry of Finance, on 18 August 2004, at the offices of the Ministry of Finance, Windhoek, Namibia.

Interview with the Under Secretary: Administration and IT Management, OPM, and Deputy Director: Systems Development, PSITM on 18 August 2004 and 20 August 2004, at the offices of OPM and PSITM, Windhoek, Namibia.

Interview with the Records Officer, DPE, on 3 August 2004, at the offices of DPE, Pretoria, South Africa.

Interview with the Records Management Archivist, NARS, on 29 July 2004, at the offices of NARS, Pretoria, South Africa.

TOWER Software. 2006. Best practice in corporate recordkeeping and archiving. *Records Management Bulletin* Issue 131: 16. This article provides details of some court cases in which e-mail messages were used as evidence, amongst them is the Micro-soft case on anti-competitive practices.

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law in the region. Unpublished paper presented at a seminar on Professional Education Project of the Faculty of Law, University of Cape Town, South Africa, May-June 2002.

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National Archives (UK) 2003. Proposed national records and archives legislation: proposal to change the current legislative provision for records management and archives, Consultative paper, CP 03/01, August 2003.

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Endnotes

1. Information communication technology is generally defined as the technology that is used for accessing, gathering, manipulating and presenting or communicating information. The technology could include hardware (e.g. computers and other devices); software applications; and connectivity (e.g. access to the Internet, local networking infrastructure, and videoconferencing. See: UNESCO, 'Education and ICTs'. [Online] Available WWW: http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=18645&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html (Accessed 6 September 2006).

2. Electronic mail is a system that enables users to compose, transmit, receive, and manage electronic messages and images across networks and through gateways connecting to other local area networks. See ARMA International, *Guidelines for managing e-mail.* Prairie Village, KS: ARMA International, 2000, p 25.

3. Electronic records can be defined as files created by electronic systems, readable by means of those systems, which are

created in the course of some business, administration or activity and used to continue that business, administration and activity. See: M Procter and M Cook, *Manual of archival description*, 3rd edition (Aldershot: Gower, 2000), p 226.

List of respondents to questionnaires and interviews

Botswana

Records Managers, Teaching Service Management, July 2003.
Record Manager, Botswana National Archives and Records Service, July 2003.
Record Manager, Attorney General's Chambers, July 2003.
Record Manager, Ministry of Local Government, July 2003.
Records Manager, Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, March 2004.
Deputy Attorney General: Civil and Prosecution, Office of Attorney General, 29 September 2004.
Senior Systems Analyst, Botswana National Archives and Records Service, 13 July 2004.

Namibia

Records Manager, St. Mary Hospital, 19 August 2004.
Records Officer, Office of the Ombudsman, 18 August 2004.
Senior Archivist/Research Officer, National Archives of Namibia, August 2003.
Under Secretary: Administration and IT Management, Office of the Prime Minister, 18 August 2004.

South Africa

Records Management Archivist, National Archives and Records Service, July 2003.
Records Manager, Department of Justice, 30 July 2004.
Records Officer, Department of Public Enterprise, 3 August 2004.