Records Management in Aid of Information Service for Change: The Nigerian Perspective

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Abstract

A record is any medium in or on which information is recorded. Medium, includes paper, magnetic tape and disc, microfilm, audio tape, film, slide and photography. Records management implies a series of activities which include the creation, distribution, use, maintenance and disposition of recorded information. It is that field of management responsible for the orderly control of creation, maintenance use and disposition of records. Records are essential to the administration of government institutions, as they contain the information that keeps government programmes functioning, and they equally give government officials the basis for making decisions, administering programmes and providing administrative continuity with past operations. They therefore constitute a vital tool for decision-making. So, the availability of the right person at the right time guarantees a well informed decision which can impact positively on society. The paper analyzed issues of records and information management and the role of this activity as an instrument of positive change in administrative efficiency and success of institutions of government.

Keywords: Records, Management, records management, Efficiency, Accountability, Effectiveness, Life cycle.

1.1 Introduction

Although it is always underestimated, information is one of the key resources in enabling the accomplishment of organisational goals (Doyle, Knipe and Du Toit 2002). The significance of records and information management cannot be over emphasized. As noted by Igbokwe and Chinyeaka (2019) records play important roles at any given stage in the life cycle of an organization. These include recruitment, training and development, promotion, transfer, implementation, monitoring, appraisal, separation, pension, organizational development etc, and they are therefore an essential information resource.

Records or information management, they further opine, is anchored on the premise that records require managing in a like manner that other government resources need managing. Information should be regarded and managed as fully important as other administrative functions since records are at the centre of governmental operations. For example, transparency and accountability can be achieved by giving the public the right of

access to information and this can only be achieved through accessible and sound records management. Thus, effective information and records management is the key and foundation any responsible government needs to provide public goods and services, fulfill its obligation of transparency and accountability towards the citizens and protect their human rights and dignity. It has been noted that the low productivity in the Nigerian public sector has been in the front burner for decades. For example; red-tapism, secrecy, inefficiency and ineffectiveness are all common features of the public sector in Nigeria. To give credibility to the fight on corruption, other social vices and unveil the secretive nature of government bureaucracy in line with global best practices, the National Assembly in 2011 passed the controversial "Freedom of information bill" subsequently signed into law by the President. But, regrettably, a new problem has reared its ugly head in the form of poor records and information management in the public sector.

2.1 Literature Review

Writing on the poor appreciation of the importance of records in American society, McCain (1953) had this to say:

Despite the fact that one's entry into this world and his exit from it are carefully recorded, and despite the fact that almost all the important events of his life in between, such as education, marriage, military service, land ownership, church membership, payment of taxes, voting privileges, social security, insurance, and numerous other items are made a matter of record, millions of Americans have no real appreciation of the value of private and public archives.

Abioye (2007) rightly noted that McCain's observation is as instructive as it is unfortunate. He further opines that this situation of lack of appreciation of records is not peculiar to American society, but true of most societies, particularly those in the

developing world. If the importance of records is little appreciated, records management is little honoured. Yet, records, through the ages, have played a pivotal role in bringing about social transformation. Most public administrators are ill-trained; and as such they lack in-depth modern managerial skills and approaches to public sector records and information management. Yet, information and records are not regarded as an important resource that could influence the efficiency of the organization as well as aid the success of freedom of information Act in Nigeria. Although rules and regulations regulating the management of records exist there is ignorance or total neglect on the part of certain public officials, and this could have adverse effects on the objectives of the freedom of information Act and ultimately on public service delivery in general.

2.2 Records

' Records' has been defined by Shephered (2006) as a recorded evidence of an activity that is of an action undertaken by an individual or a work group in the course of their activities. In a manual system, the information that business needs to carry on vital activities is contained in various business records which are stored in filing systems. *'Records',* refers to all the information that is kept by an organization it may be in the form of correspondence, cards, tapes, or microforms. Correspondence refers to any written communication that has not been designed to be placed in a card or forms file.

As noted by Abioye (2007), the term *'record'* derived its origin from the Latin word *recordari* meaning to be mindful of or to remember (Esse, 2000). It refers to recorded information, regardless of form or medium, received and maintained by an agency, institution, organization or individual in pursuance of its legal obligations or in transaction of business of any kind (Charman, 1990). The term *record* was defined in the

interpretation section of the Nigerian National Archives Act of 1992 (i.e. in Section 52) as:

"records means all papers, registers, printed matters, books, maps, plans, photographs, microfilms, cinematographic films, sound recordings, or other documentary materials regardless of physical form or characteristics made or received by public or state offices, or by business or companies, private bodies or individuals in pursuance of their legal obligations or in connection with the transaction of their business".

By this definition it is clear that records can be in any format: paper, film, tape or digital. Abioye has argued that *records keeping* is not a monopoly of the modern society as the art has evolved from the early cave paintings to the present day digital environment. The art of writing and technology have however played a crucial role in bringing about the big transformation witnessed in record keeping.

A system is a series of related steps followed in accomplishing a major office activity. A *manual filling system* is an arrangement of equipment and supplies to permit the storage of records according to a definite plan. A *procedure* is a series of related sub steps performed to carry out part of the system. A method is the breakdown of a procedure into the steps by which the procedure is accomplished. A *caption* is a name or number used to identify records for filling purposes. For example, if a letter is to be kept in the Aba shoes company file, the name of the business is the caption. A caption is typed on a folder label. A subject filling system uses the names of items or objects as captions for example, subject captions might be *Automobile;* Repairs: *Automobile:* and sales: *Automobile.* A numeric system assigns numbers to the business or special names and individual names.

2.3 Computer

Both at home and in business and organizations, computers have become the rule rather than the exception when it comes to managing records. A software application assigned specifically for managing records is called *database* software. The task of maintaining these files in order to obtain, or retrieve the data from them, requires a *database management system.* Through the database management system, the computer user can retrieve information alphabetically, numerically by subject or geographically.

In computer data processing, a *record* is a collection of *data* items arranged for processing by a *program.* Multiple records are contained in a *file* or data set. The organization of data in the record is usually prescribed' by the programming language that defines the record's organization and /or by the application that processes it. Typically records can be of fixed length or be of variable length with the length information contained within the record.

And in a database, a *record* (sometimes called a *row)* is a group of *fields* within a table that are relevant to a specific *entity.* For example in a table called customer contact information, a row would likely contain fields such as: *ID number, name, street address, city, telephone number* and so on.

2.4 Records Management

The concept of records management originated from the United States of America in 1940. This was in reaction to the problems posed by paper records explosion (Imeremba 2007). Investigation started in the United States and the United Kingdom when commissions of inquiry were set up in 1957 and 1952 respectively, to look into the problems and make recommendations. In the United States of America, the commission set up called the Hoover Commission, in turn set up a task force called the Leahy taskforce on paper work management, headed by Emmett Leahy to find solution to the problem of managing records (Imeremba 2007, Abioye

2007). Emmett Leahy was the Executive Director of the National Records Management Council of the U.S Federal Government. The Task force submitted its report to the commission on October 14, 1948, and this was in turn presented to the congress in January 1949 by Mr. H. Hoover the chairman of the commission (Daramola 2000; Abioye 2007; Imeremba 2007). Following Government acceptance of the report, by early 1950s the Federal Records Acts were promulgated and government established nine records centres in the country. Then, from the U.S, the concept of Records Management Spread to all parts of the world.

In the U.K, the parliament in 1952, received the report of the committee on Departmental Records headed by the Rt. Hon. Sir James Grigg. This and other reports from other commissions of enquiry played very important roles in the establishment of the concept of records management in U.K.

In Nigeria the British colonial administration showed interest in the management of the records of its activities in the country, by sending dispatches to its officials on the subject of records management. This started as far back as 1914. But it was not until the early 1950s that concrete efforts were made to establish the Nigerian Record Office through the efforts of Kenneth Dike. The National Archives (as it was later known) was established and by early 1970s it established a records management division. Presently, the National Archives Act grants the institution the power to coordinate the records management programme in Nigeria.

' Records Management' as a concept can be defined as a planned programme for the creation, maintenance, retention, transfer and disposition of records. Its essence is to ensure efficiency and economy in the use of records.

Life Cycle of a business Record

A knowledgeable business person is not only concerned with how records make it possible to run a business at a profit but is also aware of the complete life cycle of each record and knows that some provision must be made for the eventual transfer and disposition of records. The life cycle of a business record has five stages: (1) creation of or receipt of records; (2) storage, protection and retrieval; (3) use; (4) transfer; and (5) disposal (Orr 2008).

Records Creation or receipt

This is the very first phase of records management, and it involves the control of creation, or receipt of records. A typical organization handles a staggering number of records daily. A large discount store or a university faculty, for example, will create hundreds of records every day-student result sheets, memos, letters, advertising copy, accounting statement, purchase orders, sales slips, checks, receiving tickets, and so forth. That same store or university will also receive hundreds, if not thousands, of pieces of correspondence daily. These may be applications for jobs, admissions, tender etc; or applications for credit, invoices, order letters, credit reports, price lists and so on.

Records creation can be controlled through specific, elements like forms design, forms management, correspondence management, reports management, management information systems, directives management, copy reproduction management and word processing (Abioye 2007).

3.1 Records use and maintenance: Storage, Protection, and Retrieval

Records use and maintenance stage is the second phase of records management. When the decision is made to retain business papers, provision must be made for storing and protection of these records during their

useful lifetime some of these will go in filing cabinets and others will be maintained by computer. Size and shape, as well as use, will have a bearing as to how these records are maintained. So, at this stage, control of records can be exercised through elements of filling and retrieval systems, files management, mail and telecommunication management and copy machine management.

Records Use: Records are stored for one principal reason and that is use. Only records that will be needed for later reference are worth the time required to store them. Office space and filing equipment are too expensive to be used to 'hide' papers that no one will ever use.

Records Transfer: As paper records become inactive-referred to only infrequently they should be pulled from the files to make room for active records. Occupying valuable office space and equipment, inactive records get in the way of the efficient use of active ones.

Records Files: These files look somewhat like regular files, except that the containers are less expensive (usually pressboard container), and they are kept in less accessible locations, such as the basement, where floor space is less expensive than in the main office (McLead and Childs, 2007). When computer records become inactive they are often stored in what is called *Archival Storage.* This data will seldom be used but must be kept for a long time (in floppy disks or magnetic tape. They don't take up much space).

Records disposition: Disposal of records, is the final and most critical phase of records management. Of course, all records that no longer serve a useful purpose should be destroyed. The decision as to when records are to be destroyed is usually made by management. The policy is determined by legal considerations and by the special needs of the business. At any rate some definite plan should be set up by management for the periodic destruction of records that are no longer of value to the organization.

3.2 Basic Elements of Records Management: The records management programme involves controlling the life cycle of records. The programme is made possible by means of certain basic elements, as are discussed below:

Records inventory

This is an important aspect of records management. A records inventory has been defined by Maedeke and others, as "a complete and accurate listing of file contents; that facilitate the appraisal, function and activities". Daramola, (1992) defines it as "a complete listing of file contents by category, together with sufficient supporting information to enable a proper evaluation of file function and activity". It is only when there is reliable information about the character, volume, informational content and the internal relationships of the records, that a valid decision on retention or disposal of records can be taken.

Records Schedule:

Alegbeleye (1992) defined a records schedule as a document describing the recurring records of an agency, institution or administrative unit, specifying those records to be preserved as having archival value and authorizing on a continuing basis and after the lapse of specified retention periods or the occurrence of specified actions or events, the destruction of the remaining records.

Abioye (2007) noted that a records schedule deals with records from their creation through their life span. There are express specific instructions in the schedule as to what will happen to the various records of an organization or department. The schedule identifies the values of records before giving

instructions as to how long such records should be kept. The greatest advantage of the schedule lies in its giving an effective control to the creation, distribution, use maintenance and final disposition of records.

There are mainly two types of schedules. They are the general schedule and the specific schedule. The National Archives Act in Nigeria gives the Director of the National Archives the power of drawing up a schedule for public records that are of common category; while a departmental records management officer bears the responsibility for specific schedule for records that are peculiar to his office.

Records Centre

Large volumes of records and low reference rate to them make it uneconomical to keep records in high cost office space. Many therefore turn to bulk storage facilities called Records centres (Imeremba, 2007) A records centre has been defined as a centralized area for the housing and servicing of inactive or semi active records whose reference rate does not warrant retention in expensive office equipments. According to Daramola (1992), the term *'records centre'* is more commonly used in the United States and Canada where it is associated with records management practices. Whereas in some other countries such as Great Britain, it is referred to as *'intermediate Repository,* or *Limbo.*

The concept of a Record Centre dates back to the 1950s. The Records centre is an intermediate records depository, which receive, store, service process and provide security for records that are not too active to be retired directly into the archives or are still too valuable to be destroyed. So, a records centre is an important element of a records management programme.

3.4 Major Benefits of a Records Management Service

Records management is the control and supervision of an organization's records so as to achieve economy and efficiency in the creation, use, maintenance, and disposition of records, or the organization, both digital and paper. It includes services such as the *storage of records* and records maintenance. When professional records management services is engaged, the following benefits are expected both for the employees, and the business organization as a whole. (Longman Mathura (2005).

(i) Prevents Information leakage through Secure Access to Confidential Information

The goal of records management is to secure safely, store and maintain an organisation's records. Confidential information records can come in different forms such as client information, employee information, company/institutional tax records, signatures etc. The risk of a purposeful or accidental information leak, may occur, if you store your information at the workplace where dozens of employees have access. But, records management professionals ensure that your records are stored in a secure location, with only trained workers ever accessing your information.

(ii) Effectively organize, track, and manage files

A lot of information can be accumulated in short periods of time, even by small businesses. But the question is, how can one keep track of them all? The unfortunate thing is that many organsations, and businesses big and small have a difficult time tracking and managing their files, fortunately, records management services can do all this for any organization.

(iii)   Efficient and Compliant Management Services

If an organization employs the services of records management professionals instead of using laymen, they would have the opportunity to work with efficient and compliant man power. Efficiency means that organisational records will always be stored in the best way possible to make retrieval easy and a simple process, and on time too.

(iv)   Provides a system to manage inventory and retention schedules

The job of records management staff (professional) is to take care of the organization's documents and records throughout their **entire lifecycle.** Part of the document lifecycle includes management and retention in case the organization gets audited or needing a record initially archived. Management of current inventory, as well as the institution's retention schedule is provided for by an efficient system provided by records management.

(v)   Quickly and cost effectively locate and retrieve critical information

Most organizations do not have the knowledge or the resources to set up a highly efficient records management system in their facility. What this means, is that large amounts of office space are designated for records storage and that employees must use part of their day to participate in document organization and retrieval. All that however can be handled by a records management system being established. Professional service will always be able to quickly, efficiently, and cost effectively find and provide management and individuals with needed critical information; ensuring consistent data entry and file retrieval at any level. This allows for new and updated data to be consistently added while all the other documents are still securely stored and managed. There are many more other

benefits.

3.5 The U.S. Freedom of Information Act and the Privacy Act:

A great deal of concern has been generated about the use of computers to process and store information, much of which is confidential in nature. There is concern that information may be released to individuals or firms and used for reasons other than those for which it was originally intended. Because the information that is maintained by computers is entered by humans, the capacity for human error exists.

As a result of errors of this kind, in the fall of 1974 the U.S. congress passed two laws to protect the individual against misuse of information on file. These laws affect the work done on records management in some situations. One of these laws is called the Freedom of Information Act. This law affects individuals and gives them the right to ask for information that pertains to them. Records such as those kept by doctors' offices, hospitals, dental clinics, psychiatric offices, and educational institutions can be requested by an individual.

At the same time, another law was passed called the Privacy Act. This law controls information which is readily available to the public. It serves to safeguard individual privacy. Your permission is necessary for someone to see your records.

As a result, we can say that the Freedom of Information Act allows you to see records about yourself. The Privacy Act limits those people who are allowed to see information contained in files about you.

The Nigerian Freedom of Information Act

The Nigerian National Assembly in 2011 passed the controversial "Freedom of Information Bill". This bill was subsequently signed into law by the President of Nigeria to become a Federal Law. This was done to give credibility to the fight on corruption, and other

social vices and to un-veil the secretive nature of government bureaucracy in line with global best practices (Igbokwe-Ibeto and Chinyeaka 2019).

3.6 Records Management in Aid of Information Service for change in Nigeria

The Webster's universal dictionary & thesaurus (2008) defines change as "to make different, to alter, to transform, to change, to put fresh clothes on...". Records and information management is a significant focal strategy in the fight against transparency in governance, and accountability in Nigeria. These goals cannot be achieved without available, accurate and accessible records and information. This is because government relies upon policy, documents, such as budget papers, procurement records, property and fixed assets, registers, accounting records et cetera, to demonstrate transparency and accountability to its citizens (Igbokwe-Ibeto and Chinyeaka 2019).

Government institutions across the world are established to provide specialized functions and services to the citizenry and the international community, in order that the basic needs of these communities would be satisfied. That is why Leach, Stewart and Walsh (1994) opine that government institutions are services providers who aim to meet the demands, needs and aspirations of those for whom the services are provided. Human organizations and government agencies function through the personnel, or Human Resources department. This department is the custodian of rules, regulations, records and extra-ministerial circulars. Igbokwe-Ibeto and Chinyeaka (2019) has argued that the ability of any institution be it public or private to carry out its mandate effectively depends on the availability of necessary and sufficient resources. Although it is always underestimated, information is one of the key resources in enabling the accomplishment of organizational goals. Information; as opined by Van Doyle, Knipe and Du Tolt (2002), is a fundamental resource to both government and the private sector alike. Information can be maintained and enhanced through appropriate records management; and effective records management is fundamental for good governance, effective and efficient administration. It forms the basis for formulating policies, managing resources and service delivery (Van der Wald et al (2002).

In the Nigerian public sector evidence of inadequate records of personnel profile abound, and also those of materials, and transactions. The evidences of these are alarming in spite of the use of ICT which is fast gaining grounds. Also, although rules and regulations regulating the management of records exist, there is pathetic ignorance or even total neglect on the part of certain public officials, and this could have adverse effects on the objectives of the Freedom of Information Act and ultimately on public service delivery in general. Take the recent probe in the Nigerian oil sector for instance; which reveals that Austin Oniwo, the immediate sacked Group managing Director of Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) had no idea of the daily production capacity of the existing functional refineries. This not withstanding; the discrepancies in the documents presented by petroleum pricing Regulating Agency, (PPRA) officials and that of the independent oil marketers over the fraudulent claims of oil subsidy, the pension scam, the Nigerian judiciary and police are synonymous with missing case files. Also in the university, and other tertiary education institutions in Nigeria; missing students' examination scripts and even results are common features. All these are visible manifestations of poor records management. Information should be regarded and managed as fully important as other administrative functions since records are at the centre of governmental operations. Transparency and

accountability can be achieved by giving the public the right of access to information and this can only be achieved through accessible and sound records management.

Conclusion

It is difficult to achieve organizational objectives without effective records management. Records management deals on planning, controlling, directing, organizing, training, promoting, and other managerial activities involving the life cycle of information including, creation maintenance use, storage retrieval and disposal, regardless of media. The goal of records management is to help an organization keep the necessary documentation accessible for both business operations and compliance audit. Therefore, records play a vital role in the life of any individual organization, institution or nation. Records constitute an invaluable memory and a dependable companion to decision-making especially as today, information constitutes the fifth factor of production. Records are essential as agents of change and social transformation. But the extent to which records are accessible for change and social retransformation is, to a very large extent, dependent on records management practices. However it is a sad story to learn that most public and private institutions in Nigeria pay lip service to records management. The time to rise up as a nation to encourage positive attitudes to records management especially in the public sector is now. This will bring about positive change and transformation throughout the life cycle of public institutions in Nigeria.

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