Implementation of a records management strategy at the Botswana Unified Revenue Service

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Abstract

This article gives an account of an academic's practical experience in implementing a records management strategy at the Botswana Unified Revenue Service (BURS). The article uses the author's personal experiences as Project Implementation Manager and also draws from the project management methodology that was used to guide successful implementation of the project. In doing this, the article starts by giving a brief background of the accounts that led to the development of the records management strategy and later the need for its implementation. The presentation follows the themes derived from the objectives that were outlined in the project implementation plan and how this was executed. It argues that an approved records management policy covering the whole life cycle of records accompanied by the necessary procedures for creation, maintenance, use and disposition of records is needed at the initiation stage. In addition, management buy-in and support; raising awareness on the importance of records; human capacity building and infrastructure development for both storage of semi-current records and management of electronic records are critical if implementation of any record management programme has to be realised. However, challenges always arise and these have to be tackled bearing in mind the organisational culture and overall strategic plan. In conclusion, it is argued that there are lessons to be drawn from the BURS records management strategy and these include: the need for organisations to develop policies and procedures that cover the life-cycle of records, appreciation of the importance of records as a strategic resource and the need to engage experienced professionals to lead the implementation exercise that will ensure monitoring and accountability.
Keywords: records, records management strategy, records management programme, Botswana

1.   Introduction

Most organisations in Botswana are beginning to recognise the need to develop and implement records management strategies and are putting up tenders for the development of such strategies. The Botswana Unified Revenue Service (BURS); Southern Africa Development Community (SADC); Botswana Telecommunications Corporation (BTA); Botswana Examinations Council (BEC); Botswana Housing Corporation (BHC) and some Land Administration Departments are examples of organisations that have shown interest in proper recordkeeping practices and have made efforts in the development of strategies to guide implementation of records and document management systems. The importance of records management in these organisations cannot be over-emphasised.

Records play an important role in ensuring that organisations achieve their mandate as they provide evidence of business transactions. This role has been widely documented in the available literature regionally and internationally (Kemoni, Ngulube & Stilwell (2007), Hamooya (2006), Makhura & Ngoepe (2006)). Makhura and Ngoepe (2006) argue that effective and efficient records management is a must in organisations and that records should be treated like all other organisational assets. According to Shepherd, Stevenson and Flinn (2011), this calls for clearly defined policies and procedures to guide the implementation of record management programmes. It would, however, appear that most organisations have not developed the

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[1] The author has worked for 2 years as a Project Implementation Manager at the Botswana Unified Revenue Service. Most of the arguments and conclusions are from the experiences gained during that period unless otherwise stated. I also take this opportunity to thank the Commissioner General, BURS; his Executive Management and all staff for giving me an opportunity to be part of BURS team, especially in leading implementation the records management strategy.

necessary policies and procedures for proper management of records and information. As further observed by Shepherd, Stevenson and Flinn (2011), most organisations have basic practices that only allow them to function in the different divisions without necessarily covering the whole scope in terms of the life cycle and all organisational offices. Some organisations that have managed to develop such policies and procedures are struggling to implement them as they lack capacity, management support and strategic direction in carrying out activities that would ensure proper management of records. Shepherd, Stevenson and Flinn (2011) have found that in the English Local Government, most organisations are still operating in silos and lack consistency in practice especially in applying systems as retention schedules.

In Botswana, recordkeeping practices remain marginally developed with only a few organisations making efforts to design records management policies and procedures. However, most of these efforts are still fragmented in approach and do not cover the whole life-cycle of records as guided by the International Standard for Records Management, ISO 15489. A number of articles written on records management developments in Botswana and surveys in some government ministries and departments in the country have reported weaknesses in classification and filing systems; appraisal and disposal of records; development and implementation of records retention schedules (Ngoepe & Keakopa, 2011; Keakopa. 2007; Tshotlo & Mnjama, 2010; Ramokate & Moatlhodi, 2010). Generally, the literature reflects growing concerns on lack of policies and procedures which are essential in implementing records management strategies. For example, Tshotlo and Mnjama (2010:19) have found that in Botswana there is no records management policy at the Gaborone City Council. Further, Ngoepe and Keakopa (2011) have reported on lack of implementation of available policies and procedures; lack of resources; poor storage facilities; lack of understanding and appreciation of the role of records management in organisations. This shows that records management in Botswana is still at infancy stage hence the need for organisations to be more aggressive in the development of records management strategies if they want to be accountable to the public. Among organisations that have made commendable progress in Botswana is BURS which has realised that well managed records and information play a significant role in carrying out its mandate and has therefore developed a strategy that has since been implemented. This paper, therefore, looks at the development and implementation of the BURS records management strategy, with a view to sharing experiences that countries in the region may draw lessons from. The presentation is guided by the project plan that was designed to lead implementation of the objectives and activities of the BURS records management strategy.

2. Research methodology

Information used in this article was mainly drawn from the author's personal experience having been involved in the development of the BURS current situation analysis report as a member of the consultancy team that developed the strategy and also as the Project Implementation Manager of the same strategy over a 2 year period (2010 to 2012). BURS annual reports and other official documents were used to inform the organisational overview and background to the development of the strategy. Discussions with staff members at BURS were helpful in getting updates on current developments of the project since the departure of the Project Implementation Manager in November 2012. Conclusions are drawn from the end of the project report that was submitted to the Executive Management at BURS. Other information is from the available general records management literature in the region and internationally.

3.   Significance of the article

This article forms a contribution to literature and knowledge on practical cases that have been successfully implemented following best practice in records management. The achievements and challenges experienced during the implementation phase can be used by other organisations that are still to develop and implement records management strategies.

4.   Botswana Unified Revenue Service (BURS): An overview

The Botswana Unified Revenue Service (BURS) was established by an Act of Parliament, Act No. 17 of 2004 which saw the merger of the legacy Departments of Taxes and Customs and Excise. The Revenue Service is responsible for assessment and collection of revenue on behalf of Government (BURS Act, Part II, 3 (1).

The BURS Act further states that BURS has to maintain adequate accounting records and be responsible for the content and integrity of financial information. This requires that the organisation puts in place internal financial controls that would maintain a strong control environment as these controls are relied upon for preparation of annual financial statements. According to Part VI; 28 (1) of the Act, the Revenue Service shall keep and maintain proper accounts and other records in respect of every financial year relating to its activities, and shall prepare in respect of each financial year a statement of such accounts. It should also submit its book of accounts to an auditor who shall audit such accounts. Further, Section 29 of the Act says that the Revenue Service shall submit reports and any other information on its operations each financial year, and should also ensure the confidentiality of all documents and information relating to all financial dealings of taxpayers. All this relies on proper recordkeeping which in itself justifies the need for records management to be a key function in the operations of the Revenue Service. For BURS to maximize revenue collection, there is pressure to embrace records management as an essential function underpinning all its operations. It is against this brief background that the BURS records management strategy is discussed.

4.1   Background to the development of the BURS records management strategy

With the mandate of assessment and collection of revenue, BURS has to ensure that proper records are maintained. A consultancy study on the recordkeeping situation analysis undertaken in 2009, however, revealed that BURS was faced with critical challenges in the management of records and information. At that time, BURS had engaged the University of Botswana and its collaborators, the International Records Management Trust (IRMT) to develop a records management strategy to address the challenges facing the organisation in the management of records and information. The strategy identified gaps in the management of BURS records and came up with strategic objectives to address the gaps. The main challenge was the lack of effective systems and procedures that allow the creation, maintenance and retrieval of records and information in both paper and electronic formats.

That was reflected in a lack of awareness on the importance of records; inappropriate storage facilities; inadequate staffing levels in the Documentation Section; lack of clearly defined classification system; absence of retention schedules; lack of disaster preparedness plan and absence of procedures manual. The Records Strategy developed by the Consultancy Team provided BURS with a strategic direction for records and information management, including the development of policies and procedures to help guide proper management of records throughout the organisation in line with international standards and best practice in records management (in particular ISO 15489:1- 2001). The Records Strategy was to be implemented in recognition of the fact that the BURS Act and other legislations require BURS to keep proper and adequate financial and accounting records. As such, the Strategy was to strategically help

guide BURS in making available authentic, reliable, accurate and quality records whenever needed to improve border and revenue administration and accountability to the public.

4.2   Implementation of the BURS records strategy

To ensure implementation of the recommendations of the consultancy strategy report, BURS engaged a Project Implementation Manager from the University of Botswana on a two year contract to spearhead project implementation. Adequate funding was provided for the project. Upon resuming work, the Project Manager had to come up with a project methodology that was to guide the strategy during the period of implementation. From this methodology, a project plan was developed with clear strategic objectives; specific activities under each objective; target measures; roles and responsibilities; budget and timelines. The discussion that follows addresses progress on implementation of the objectives that were documented in the project action plan and in doing so, it follows the themes derived from the project objectives.

a) Project governance structure

Formation of the governance structure was a priority to ensure the project was well executed, monitored and reviewed throughout the period of implementation. This was important in ensuring that any challenges that arose were addressed without delay. Heads of Divisions submitted names of representatives who formed part of the key body in the project governance structure for the Records Management Project. Regular meetings were held to review progress and guide a number of records management activities as outlined in the project plan.

b) Approval of policies and procedures

Another important objective was the need to approve policies and procedures that were to guide implementation. The BURS records management policies and procedures which included the records management policy, e-mail policy, records procedures manual and the records retention schedule were approved by Executive Management and were made available on the BURS Intranet for all staff to access and familiarise themselves with for purposes of compliance. This showed that Management was fully committed to the project. The policies and procedures are currently under implementation and copies of these were distributed to staff during the awareness workshops that were conducted in all offices across the country. Continuous training is, however, needed to ensure compliance by all staff. Without policies and procedures, it is not easy for an organisation to implement total records management programme and get management support. Hence, this was a good starting point for the BURS project.

c) Raising awareness on the importance for records

Raising awareness on the importance of records as a strategic resource in the organisation was an important step during implementation as all staff had to buy-in to the project and understand their responsibilities during the different phases of implementation. For the BURS project, records management awareness workshops for all staff at different levels at both headquarters and all regional offices, including boarder stations were successfully completed. This assisted with staff buy-in and support. However, more workshops should continue to be conducted to cover all staff to ensure compliance with the approved records management policies and procedures. It emerged from the evaluation of the workshops that Management and all BURS staff appreciated the importance of records and acknowledged that there was an urgent need to address staffing and storage requirements for the Documentation Section which is responsible for all records management activities in the organisation. Consultations with various

Divisions to address specific records management challenges continued throughout the two year implementation period and this helped by connecting records to business activities in the different Divisions and staff appreciating its relevance to their working environment. This took a lot of effort and commitment to train staff on the relevance of records in their operations.

d) *Appraisal and disposal of semi-current records*

During the period of implementation, temporary officers were engaged to assist with appraisal and disposal of old records from the legacy Departments of Taxes and Customs and Excise. A significant volume of old records with no values was destroyed. A destruction authority was also issued to regions and they are continuously destroying old records. Other records for which the five year retention period had expired since the time of their creation were authorised for destruction and the authority was issued to all Regional Managers and Officers in Charge at border posts during the period of implementation. Disposal methods were discussed and agreed with officers in regions and stations. There were also discussions to review storage arrangements with commercial storage facilities that had been engaged in the past by the Department of Customs and Excise to further dispose old records as per provisions of the retention and disposition schedule. It is unfortunate that since the departure of the Project Manager a number of activities have not been attended to.

Communication was also issued to officers at headquarters offices guiding them on decongestion of records and other documentation which are lying on desks; in cupboards; on the floor and around windows and are not needed in undertaking BURS current business. It was not surprising that some of the files said to be missing were found buried under heaps of documentation lying around these areas. While the Documentation Section was battling with storage problems, it was doing its best to decongest as much as it could. This helped in minimising costs for storage of valueless records and ensured only records needed for carrying out BURS mandate were kept. This also reduced the volume of closed files from active office space and brought efficiency in movement and tracking of files. Worth noting is the fact that some Divisions such as the Human Resources showed enthusiasm and became proactive in ensuring decongestion of their offices. This significant move complemented the project decongestion exercise.

It should be noted that there has been significant progress made in appraisal and disposition of records at BURS. In spite of this, it is worrying that there is continuing growth of large volumes of records especially the new tax payer registration and tax return forms resulting from amendments in tax laws during 2011/2012. This means that the Documentation Section should be capacitated to deal with the growing volumes as it appears as if inadequate preparation was made for this sudden change. Finance records also remain a big challenge as they occupy a substantial amount of storage space available. The project is mainly challenged by the fact that it has limited human resource capacity to cope with the growth of records as BURS is still highly manual. While embracing the use of ICT, it should be noted that most systems are still paper based.

e) *New classification system*

As part of the implementation exercise, a new functional classification system was developed for policy files. As observed by Henttonen and Kettunem (2011), classification is an essential tool and it assists the organisation in retrieval of records. In spite of this importance, Makhura and Ngoepe (2006) established that organisations are still managing records without classification systems. The methodology for the design of the BURS classification system was guided by the organisational structure and interviews with heads of Divisions which assisted in

identifying the main functions and activities performed under each broad function which generated the records. The new functional classification for policy files was approved by the Executive Management and implementation commenced in October 2012. A number of workshops were conducted in all BURS offices including regions and boarder stations to guide on implementation of the new classification system. There was a lot of staff buy-in as they appreciated the efforts made by the Documentation Section in ensuring standardisation in filing of records according to the main BURS functions. Follow up visits were made to all offices to ensure smooth implementation and compliance. The second phase of classification is expected to focus on case files including personnel records. However, it is worrying that this may take longer than expected as the departure of the Project Manager has so far affected a number of activities which are still to be attended to.

e) *Mail management*

Mail management is the responsibility of the Document Section and it has been one of the biggest challenges facing the Section. On average the Section handles 10,000 letters a day and these are processed manually. However, the project facilitated a search for a workable solution which resulted in outsourcing of the mail management service. Following from this, a bulk mail management solution was proposed to and approved by the Executive Management and an agreement has been signed with the Botswana Post to take over the service. The trial run that was undertaken in preparation for outsourcing the service was important as it experienced a number of challenges that have since been addressed. This is expected to significantly assist BURS with management of bulk mail.

f) *Staffing levels and training.*

Capacity building and in particular staffing levels was a major setback during the implementation period. Efforts were, however, made during the two year period to recruit permanent staff for the Documentation Section to build capacity for implementation of the records management policies and procedures. A proposal with a recommended structure and graded profiles was presented to Management for consideration. While this was appreciated, current plans are that it will be considered as part of the envisaged organisational restructuring exercise. This activity is, therefore, expected to be carried forward in the new plan for the 2013/2014 financial year and beyond.

On a slightly positive note, four posts were advertised and this was to assist in building capacity and ensure transfer of skills for continuity. However, this is still far from the number needed as documented in the original staffing proposal submitted to Management. Regrettably, a follow up inquiry has revealed that to date, the advertised posts have not been filled as yet. This is one drawback that frustrated the project as capacity building is one area that can ensure sustainability of the project in future.

Meanwhile, two records officers were sent to do a diploma course on records management at the Botswana Institute of Development Management (IDM) and another a degree course at the University of Botswana, while two others attended a short course on electronic records management in South Africa during the second year of the implementation period. This was envisaged to strengthen capacity in implementation of the records management policies and procedures.

Currently, BURS is far short of professional records officers in all its registries (now commonly known as Records Management Units) and none in regional offices. It is worth noting that the BURS Records Management Units had over the years depended on temporary staff and continued to do so even during implementation of the strategy. Sadly, the qualified

temporary officers are continuously resigning to take up permanent employment elsewhere. This has rendered BURS a training ground for government ministries and the private sector that are recognising the importance of records in their business operations. This is not peculiar to BURS as studies by Keakopa and Kalusopa (2010) and Ngoepe and Keakopa (2011) have reported on the same challenges in Botswana and South Africa. It would appear that there was "very little or nothing" BURS could do about the situation, at least during the two year implementation period. It would also appear that the environment in which the strategy is being implemented has not been conducive enough to support implementation and the challenge can only be understood within the context of the organisational culture. As Shepherd and Yeo (2003:30) observe, it is important to understand the organisational environment, "its structure and broader issues that influence its operations" as this will have an impact on implementation of policies and procedures.

g) Appropriate storage for current and semi-current records

One of the major challenges facing BURS was availability of appropriate storage for both current and semi-current records. It is important that organisational records be properly stored and preserved so that they are available for reference whenever needed for decision making. To create space in the congested offices storing current records, the strategy made efforts to list and box some of the records mainly from Finance and Value Added Tax (VAT) functions and transfer them to the rented off-site warehouse. This was meant to create space that was needed for current files and the newly created ones which were accumulating in large volumes. As indicated earlier, the Documentation Section has limited capacity to help with handling the sudden growth of records which had taken all the filing space. This remains one of the immense problems facing BURS. It would, however, appear that there is little that BURS can do as there is shortage of space at headquarters as it has no purposely designed rooms with a suitable layout for the storage of records. A solution can only be sought once a new building has been completed as it will cater for all Divisions in terms of storage space for their records.

The current storage facilities for current records are inappropriate for security and preservation of records. There are, however, plans for a new building for which the Documentation Section has already submitted storage requirements for records storage. This is expected to solve problems of records storage as the current rented building is overwhelmed by the growth of records at the Revenue Service.

Having realised that the Documentation Section urgently needs more storage space, Management proposed that alternative storage space be sought to address the storage needs of the Section. In fact this has been the trend in most countries in the region where organisations are outsourcing storage of semi-current records to commercial facilities. A proposal with cost implications was presented and approved by Executive Management. At the end of the contract period in December 2012, an agreement with Crown Records Management which is a commercial storage facility had been signed. This was meant to relieve BURS of storage space. In future, it is expected that efforts will be made to consolidate storage of all semi-current records in one area. BURS had also been advised to utilise available land in regions to build own storage. Though initial costs may be high, in the long-term, this will prove to be cost effective given that BURS will continue to generate records as long as it exists and these will need long-term storage.

h) Management of electronic records

Management of electronic records is one of the recent challenges confronting records and information professionals in the East and Southern African Regional Branch on Archives

(ESARBICA). Different organisations in member countries are making efforts to procure electronic systems for management of records and other documents. This was one of the objectives of the BURS project as the definition of records was adopted from the international standard for records management which defines records as recorded information regardless of form or medium. As for BURS, the draft Statement of User Requirements (SOUR) was prepared and finalised in consultation with the Information Technology (IT) Division. The partnership between IT Division and the Documentation Section was important in mapping the business processes and defining the technological environment which generated electronic records and which needed to be captured and preserved as organisational records. A business plan which summarises the SOUR is still to be presented to the Executive Management for consideration and approval. This should lay the foundation for preparation of the Invitation to Tender (ITT) which will in turn lead to procurement of an Electronic Document and Records Management System (EDRMS) for managing all BURS records. It is important to use IT expertise to deal with challenges in the management of electronic records. Ngoepe, Mokoena and Ngulube (2010:63) cautioned that records management professionals "need to be involved in planning for all new systems and in major modifications of existing ones" as these will impact on management of electronic records. There is hope that with BURS embracing the use of ICTs, this will help to capture and manage electronic records and it ensures the integration of emails in the EDRM system.

i)   Development of a disaster management plan

Disaster management forms an important part of a records management programme. This is because measures have to be put in place to ensure that records are saved in case a disaster strikes in an organisation. For this reason the records strategy took this into account and had a disaster preparedness plan in its action plan. This disaster plan was, however, prepared solely for records. During its presentation to the Executive Management, it was decided that the plan be extended to cover all assets belonging to the organisation. As such, a decision was made to draft the terms of reference that would guide the task force to prepare the plan. The plan has since been prepared and was provisionally approved by Management. The task force still has to be assembled to take up the assignment.

5.   Challenges experienced during implementation

Although the implementation of the BURS records management strategy was overall a success, it was not without challenges that slowed progress on a number of activities. One notable factor was that it covered the whole life-cycle of records from creation to disposition following international best practice standards as provided by ISO 15489- an International Standard for Records Management. This was significant because in most other organisations implementation only focuses on few aspects of the life-cycle and this limits the scope of implementation. For example, for some, design of filing systems only focuses on existing indexes and records and does not look at the overall organisational structure to understand the functions and records generated out of these functions, resulting in inconsistencies in application of procedures.

In spite of its success two major challenges emerged that have since slowed the implementation. First, recruitment and retention of professionals to increase staffing was a challenge throughout the implementation period. This affected the building of capacity and in turn continuity in carrying out major changes that had been introduced. The temporary officers engaged continued to leave for permanent employment elsewhere. BURS still needs expertise in this area to build capacity and ensure a higher success rate of the programme. It is, therefore,

important for organisations that are keen to develop and implement records management strategies to recognise that human resource capacity is a catalyst for success. This is in recognition of the fact that records management is labour intensive and as such requires not just adequate staffing but also well-trained staff. Shepherd, Stevenson and Flinn (2011) have rightly observed that records management needs dedicated staff. In fact, Makhura and Ngoepe (2006) have recommended that the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa (NARS) needs to employ more records management professionals to fulfill its mandate.

The second major challenge was inappropriate records storage facilities which compromised both the security and preservation of records in the long-term. A study by Shepherd, Stevenson and Flinn (2011) on records management in the English Local Government found that safekeeping of records is still an issue of concern. Generally, poor storage of records in most organisations remains a concern. At BURS, the rate of records growth is significantly high and alarming as compared to most organisations because of its broad mandate and storage facilities are generally inappropriate. In the long term, BURS has been advised to build its own storage facility for semi-current records and not depend on renting as this is proving to be expensive.

Other challenges experienced included management delays in taking action on some activities especially feedback on staffing needs and failure by some staff members at middle management level to attend workshops intended to raise awareness. It is also worrisome that at the end of the two year project period; there have been reports of inadequate efforts made in continuing with the remaining planned activities for the following financial period, 2013/2014 even though such activities were presented and handed over to the Executive Management to ensure continuation of the project. Unless the gap that has been created by the departure of the Project Implementation Manager is attended to, the whole records management strategy will collapse and will need additional resources to resuscitate.

6.   Are there lessons for the ESARBICA region?

Without doubt, the BURS records management strategy made a significant mark in the history of records management in Botswana. During the period of implementation a number of organisations showed a lot of interest and they undertook visits as part of benchmarking exercises. These include among others, the Botswana Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) and the Local Enterprise Authority (LEA). Other institutions are making inquiries on steps involved in the development of a records management strategy. This in itself shows that there are lessons to draw from the BURS project not only within Botswana but for the rest of the region. It is likely that more organisations will visit BURS in the near future as they develop their own strategies. Without doubt, BURS remains a leader in the development and implementation of a model records management strategy. For organisations planning to draw lessons, implementation of the strategy will need change management; a powerful person committed to bring change to ensure successful implementation.

Most organisations in Botswana and the rest of the region still need to develop and implement strategies that can ensure proper recordkeeping such as policies and procedures. Well maintained records will give public officers confidence to service the public and this in turn will ensure that the rights of the public are protected.

7.   Conclusion and way forward

What is clearly emerging from the discussion in this article is that a records management function in any organisation should be placed strategically if records have to play a meaningful role in organisational strategic directions and overall national development. The approach taken

by BURS firmly placed records management in BURS's strategic agenda as the organisation needed to respond effectively to public demands. It should also be headed by a professional who can make policy decisions as shown in the BURS records management strategy. This is important for raising the profile of records management and for effective implementation.

While BURS has provided lessons which other organisations can learn from, it has to go further in committing to the sustainability of the records strategy. Funding alone cannot ensure success of a project. From the BURS experience, a lot of funds were made available but without professional staff, little could be achieved.

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