

# Records management for open government at Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development Botswana

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to help records and information management professionals of organisations for both the public and private sector to understand the role good records keeping brings to the attainment of open government. This paper complements open government through the application of a records management perspective to an analysis of the records management practices. Conversely, the study adopted a mixed methods approach to collect data from the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (MLGRD) that consisted of purposively sampled respondents. The target population consisted of 54 respondents. Forty-five questionnaires were distributed, with 33 successfully completed and returned to the researcher. Similarly, nine Heads of Departments (HoDs) were scheduled for interviews and only five interviews successfully continued as planned, and the study included appropriate documents for analysis. The study's findings showed that there is a lack of good records management overall at the MLGRD, which emanated from unskilled records management staff. Similarly, the study identified MLGRD staff manning the records management division to being incapable of managing digital records. Furthermore, the findings revealed that there is no proper infrastructure to manage digital records and that there is no records management policy to be used to guide on good records keeping practices. Based on the findings, the study, among others, it is recommended that the records management staff of the MLGRD should be upskilled to have records management competencies, especially in digital records keeping, and that the MLGRD should acquire ICT infrastructure to support good digital records keeping practices.

**Keywords:** Records management, e-records management, open government, public sector, e-government, open government implementation model

## 1. Introduction

Government transparency can only be achieved through the aid of good records keeping. It is through these records that government officials can be held accountable for their actions on decisions they take while in office. Records management aids organisations in creating records to preserve information for future reference and processing. Therefore, these records that are created to help guarantee accountability by organisations and thus safeguard evidence of its activities, all while allowing timely administrative access to information and the subsequent preservation of the records from their creation until their planned time of destruction (Mukred, Yusof, Asma'Mokhtar & Fauz 2019). It is clear that records are critical in the achievement of transparency. According to De Mingo and Cerrillo-i-Martínez (2018:256), "transparency by design refers to the incorporation of transparency obligations into a record's lifecycle, from the moment it is created, to guarantee effective public access to public information, and to also provide a guarantee of records' integrity and their traceability to the original source." It is through open government that accountability by those in office and ultimately good records management may be realised. For citizens'

and residents alike to fully participate in decision-making and to successfully collaborate with the government on matters affecting them, information availability and access are required. According to Cingolani (2021), open government brings about economic and institutional maturity in many forms because it brings innovation and economic growth, as governments make new volumes of information openly available in reusable formats, which members of the public utilise in their innovative endeavours and in ensuring that those in public offices do not abuse their positions. Thus, these innovative efforts and the fight against corrupt officials are somewhat reliant on open government, which is explained by Cingolani (2021) as most commonly including a combination of citizens' 'vision' (transparency) and 'voice' (participation) with regard to public matters.

### **1.1 Contextual setting to the area of the study**

The Ministry of Local Government was founded specifically to decentralise government and ensure public participation for local government governance and service delivery. The Ministry of Local Government consists of (a) Councils (City Councils, Town Councils and District Councils); (b) District Administration, headed by District Commissioners; (c) Land Boards, created after independence for allocation of tribal land and (d) tribal administration, headed by chiefs as traditional leaders (Sharma 2010). Furthermore, it is through the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (MLGRD) that the Government of Botswana is responsible for creating an enabling environment for community development and for providing basic infrastructure and social services (Samboma 2019). According to Sharma (2010:136), "the District Administration operates as a representative of central government in the district. This office is an instrument of de-concentration and performs the functions allocated by the central government. The main function of the District Commissioner is to coordinate rural development activities at the district level, primarily as chairperson of the District Development Committee (DDC). This committee has representation from the District Council, Land Board and Tribal Administration, as well as district level representatives of various government ministries, and has a central role in coordination of district level development plans."

### **1.2 Theoretical framework**

Theories in empirical research are important to provide a guide in perspective and assist the researcher to understand causal effect to the phenomena under study. This study used the open government implementation model (OGIM) (Lee & Kwak 2011) as its theoretical lens.

The OGIM was selected as the most suitable theory to adopt for this study because it looks at fundamentals regarding openness and gives reasons why the strategies adopted are ideal for open government and are applicable to Botswana's openness efforts. According to Lee and Kwak (2011), governments should advance their open government initiatives incrementally, whereby focus is placed on one stage at a time beginning with stage one, which focuses on increasing data transparency, followed by the second stage, which is centred on improving open participation. The third stage is enhancing open collaboration, while the last stage looks at realising ubiquitous engagement. The OGIM explains that at the first stage, agencies or government departments share with the members of the public relevant data by publishing it online (Lee & Kwak 2011). This is done meticulously by identifying high-value and high-impact data to disseminate and followed by the agencies striving to improve and assure data quality through accuracy, consistency and timeliness (Lee & Kwak 2011).

Furthermore, according to the OGIM, in stage two there is a focus on the improvement by government agencies and departments of open participation and decision-making for the public through a diverse number of platforms such as the use of social media and other web 2.0 tools. Stage three is geared towards open collaborations between government agencies, the public and the private sector by sharing government data and public inputs and feedback. This is done through platforms such as wiki applications and Google Docs. The OGIM lastly identifies stage four as the stage where agencies take transparency, participation

and collaboration to the next level of public engagement by perfecting already existing open government initiatives to maximise their benefits and to further benefit the public. In order to realise ubiquitous engagement of all, this stage recognises that first there has to be ubiquitous mobile computing, which will help drive public engagement and seamless incorporation of all the other public engagement methods across government departments (Lee & Kwak 2011).

Applicable to the open government initiatives context in Botswana, the OGIM concentrates on a drive towards ensuring that information and records found in various government departments are made available through digital platforms. Mosweu (2021) observes that the Botswana government adopted the use of various social media platforms to engage with its citizens. Conversely, the theory also, considers that through the availability of information, there is an opportunity for citizens' participation in matters affecting them and in governance as a whole. Therefore, records management is important to ascertain these efforts of openness as shown by the OGIM theory. According to Guto and Jumba (2021:53) citing Isa (2009), "electronic records management practices bring about transparency, accountability, continuity, improved service delivery." Similarly, Abiola and Ugwoke (2021) posit that an effective and efficient implementation of electronic records management practice is the backbone of organisations as it pushes for businesses and the members of the public to interact through accurate available information.

### **1.3 Statement of the problem**

Poor records-keeping practices resulting from a variety of factors inhibit open government, transparency and ultimately accountability. A lack of regulatory frameworks, unskilled labour forces, specifically unskilled records management personnel, poor information communications technologies (ICTs) infrastructure and the overall digital divide that persists are common to Africa. According to Kalusopa, Mosweu and Bayane (2021), Botswana is grappling with challenges such as inadequate digital records management and a lack of trained staff. Similarly, another study conducted by Mukred et al. (2019) pointed out that African countries lack legislation that deals with electronic records and electronic archives. Therefore, the MLGRD is deficient on appropriate regulatory frameworks, appropriate ICT infrastructure for good records management and skilled personnel. Safarov (2019) laments that incorporating strong legal frameworks is imperative in achieving a successful implementation drive towards open government. Similarly, poorly skilled staff hinders efforts to a successful open government. Specifically, skills and relevant knowledge for searching, selecting, collecting, processing, analysing and presenting data are viewed as vital to effective open government data utilisation (Safarov 2019). Therefore, this study looks at the role of records management in open government and tries to establish whether records management has been sufficiently infused into the country's open government initiatives.

## **2. Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study was to aid records and information management professionals to recognise the role that good records keeping brings in support of open government. Objectives of the study are outlined below.

### **2.1 Objectives of the study**

The objectives of the study were as follows:

- To determine the role of records management in open government activities and if records management was incorporated into Botswana's open government initiatives.
- To examine the records management skill set available to support open government.

### 3. Literature review

This section presents the literature review of the study.

#### 3.1 Open government overview

According to O'Connor, Janenova and Knox (2019:66), citing Meijer (2012), open government is defined as "the extent to which citizens can monitor and influence government processes through access to government information and decision making arenas." When citizens exert pressure on government officials to be accountable, it helps with matters surrounding service delivery, the fight against corruption and, more importantly, enhancing citizens' participation in government. These sentiments are shared by Criado, Ruvalcaba-Gómez and Valenzuela-Mendoza (2018) who opine that due to open government, it is denoted that a symbiotic relationship manifests itself in mutual collaboration between the citizens and the state. Therefore, open government is principally anchored in three principles: transparency, participation and collaboration (Criado et al. 2018).

Therefore, public participation entails citizens' involvement, nongovernmental organisations, businesses and other major stakeholders in governance. Due to this involvement, it is often aimed at consulting, managing or providing feedback on government operations (Ruvalcaba-Gomez 2019).

Therefore, open government, supported by good records keeping practices, aids governments in their quest for transparency and accountability, as they are anchored in the availability of reliable information for citizens to be able to scrutinise those in office. According to De Mingo and Cerrillo-i-Martínez (2018:258), "records management provides a methodology for ensuring that authoritative and reliable information about, and evidence of, business activities is created, managed and made accessible to those who need it for as long as required."

#### 3.2 Botswana's e-government drive

To improve on service delivery, the Government of Botswana embarked on a drive to digitise the public sector. This move towards automation was initiated through the 2012 e-government initiative/drive. According to Mokone, Eyitayo and Masizana-Katongo (2018), by 2010, Botswana finished the e-government strategy for the period of 2011 to 2016. This strategy was developed with the aim of improving service delivery in the public sector by enhancing the quality, efficiency and convenience to services through an online platform. Mosweu and Kenosi (2018) observe that e-government in Botswana is still in its infancy and although a relatively new development, the country has a modern technical infrastructure capable of delivering services to the public and the business community. Bante et al. (2021) explain that the e-government drive was propagated to be implemented from 2015 to 2021. However, as Bante et al. (2021) discovered, the proposed e-government initiative has not been implemented and is unclear about when that will be undertaken, despite some e-government services being established, such as water and electricity online payment systems, individual income or value-added tax returns and a website informing about all the laws of the republic called Botswana e-Laws and a digital Livestock Identification and Traceback System for cattle. Furthermore, numerous government ministries provide downloadable information and forms on their websites, but they do not offer the possibility of submitting them online.

The Botswana government envisaged to work as one enterprise through the integrated online system called 1Gov (Botswana Government, 2011). According to Mokone et al. (2018), in order to provide high-quality services to the citizens, a seamless integration of information, technologies and structures was required. "The goal for the e-government was that once the strategy is fully implemented, clients would access government services through computers and mobile phones, through libraries and Kitsong Centres

(community centres) in nearby villages, via a central call centre or a conveniently placed kiosk, in-person at a Government Service Centre, or directly through a ministry office” (Mokone et al. 2018:3).

### **3.3 Digital records management in Botswana**

Electronic records are defined as files created by electronic systems, readable by means of those systems, which are created in the course of business, administration or activity and used to continue that business, administration and activity (Procter & Cook 2000). Botswana has seen tremendous growth in the digitisation drive on records management because of numerous factors. According to Mosweu (2021), governments communicate through social media platforms and such communication results in digital records that require to be managed accordingly for accountability purposes. Public sector organisations have been found to increasingly implement digital records management systems to improve service delivery (Mosweu & Chaterera-Zambuko 2021).

According to Keakopa (2018), a significant number of organisations in Botswana are managing digital records through a vast array of systems designated to manage electronic records at different capacities. Systems identified are Computerised Case Management System, Computerised Personnel Management System and the Government Accounting and Budgeting System. Despite developments and strides made to digitise business processes such as accounting, human resources, land and finance (Keakopa 2018), the Botswana National Archives and Records Service (BNARS) department as a government body overseeing the management of archives and records in the land, does not have adequate frameworks to help in the guidance of records and information management especially digital records. The Botswana National Archives and Services Act (2007) does not cater sufficiently for the management of electronic records, as it focuses on the definition of what an electronic record is with nothing more to address on e-records (Moathodi & Kalusopa 2016; Mosweu & Simon 2018).

### **3.4 Skills and competencies to manage records**

Good records management cannot be overemphasised to aid in decision-making in the conduct of business. According to Mosweu and Bwalya (2022), archives and records management specialists need knowledge and skills to perform in a networked environment wherein records management functions are computerised. Literature, with specific mention of Botswana, demonstrates that electronic records management is still in its early stages and the skills and competences necessary for its management remain a problem. On a similar vein, staffing in the ESARBICA region has always been a major concern due to untrained archives and records management personnel, including other parts of Africa such as in Ghana where it was established that poor records keeping is due to untrained staff, resulting in loss of important records (Kalusopa et al. 2017; Mahama 2017). Despite the digitisation endeavour by government through e-government, lack of capacity to manage digital records has been identified as apparent since the inception of e-government by the Government of Botswana (Mosweu 2019). A relevant skill set is the cornerstone of the ultimate attainment of open government, as information provided allows open government to prevail. This sentiments are further cemented and echoed by Mukred et al. (2019) lamenting that organisations are advised to employ professionals to establish and manage records management systems despite most organisations still not heeding that advise.

### **3.5 Technologies and infrastructure supporting records management**

Enterprises conduct records management through the traditional paper-based systems or the use of ICTs in the form of electronic document and records management systems among the many systems they adopt and use. However, in digitally inclined systems several challenges exist. Numerous studies found a lack of relevant infrastructure to support and successfully implement digital records management in Botswana (Ngoepe & Saurombe 2016; Ngoepe & Keakopa 2012). Similarly, Ndlovu, Scott and Mars (2021) opine

that digital records management systems operability challenges included weak ICT infrastructure. Critical to the availability of facilities and infrastructure is the ability to optimally utilise those resources. Henry and Njenga (2021) state that an investment in ICT infrastructures such as computers and programs is equally imperative.

#### **4. Research methodology**

This study adopted a mixed methods research design. According to Schoonenboom and Johnson (2017:108), “Mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (for example, use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration.” This type of research strategy is ideal in the social sciences, as explained by Guba and Lincoln (2005) that mixed methods research obeys the criteria of scientific rigor and therefore is advantageous as it combines the strengths of both the quantitative and qualitative methods, with each method complementing and compensating for the other method’s shortcomings. Therefore, data were collected through scheduled interviews, self-administered questionnaires and document analysis of strategic and informative secondary sources of information. Fifty-four respondents made up the target population for the study. Forty-five questionnaires were distributed and 33 were successfully completed and returned to the researcher. Interviews were scheduled and conducted with only five HoDs. The study also included the use of relevant documents for analysis. Purposive sampling was chosen as the appropriate method of selecting suitable study participants. Sharma (2017) explains that purposive sampling is reliant on the judgement of the researcher about the units to be understudied. For this reason, the researcher used this sampling technique to identify participants from the records management unit (RMU) that could address matters surrounding records management and its contributions to open government, as well as participants from the information technology (IT) department and other departments from the ministry to engage with. In addition, to establish their perceptions on records management practices in the ministry and determine their views regarding technologies used that aid in facilitating records management, the study purposively selected respondents for the administered questionnaires and interviews undertaken. Moreover, for analysis purposes the data collected were analysed thematically and presented in tables. For quantitative data analysis, interpreted data were presented using tables and graphs whereas for qualitative data, analysis was descriptive. Therefore, quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (Bryman 2012). The qualitative data presentation was interpreted in line with the objectives of the study (Miles, Huberman & Saldana 2014) and qualitative data were coded and summarised to make meaningful interpretations.

#### **5. Findings and discussions**

This section analyses and presents the results of the data obtained through questionnaires, interviews and document analysis. This study revealed that respondents and participants both have a wide array of educational qualifications, including skills set in archives and records management, computer science and administration, to mention just a few. The qualifications are ideal for archives and records management professionals and ICT specialists. Similarly, the study population’s work experience ranged from one year to more than 15 years. This ultimately suggests that they have adequate experience in their respective professional fields. Thus, the presented study findings were limited to the processes and procedures in place to manage either paper or digital records in the MLGRD.

##### **5.1 Skills and competencies**

Imperative to service delivery is the skill set of officers assigned to a task possess. The study revealed a deficiency in especially electronic records management expertise at the MLGRD. The researcher found that MLGRD staff opined that records management personnel needed to be upskilled to match current

records management office needs, especially in the digital age. Similarly, most of those manning the RMU (11) had a certificate qualification, six had diplomas, while only one had a degree, out of a total number of 18 records officers. Mosweu, Bwalya and Mutshewa (2016) opine that the poor use of an e-records management software was caused by several reasons such as the high cost of maintaining the facilities. They further explain that the problem of managing e-records did not lie with their acquisition but rather with employing experienced and knowledgeable staff members who hold knowledge in ICT application and maintenance. According to Mosweu et al. (2016), to avoid “technological quicksand” (a practice of acquiring costly technologies without engaging an experienced technician to operate and maintain them), it is better to employ skilled technicians or re-skill the exiting staff members who will use the tools appropriately. Furthermore, Karlos and Nengomasha (2018) opine that, essentially, in Botswana particularly, key primary factors contributing to the low adoption and use of systems included technophobia, negative attitudes to system use, perceived system complexity and incompatibility with existing information systems.

A question was posed to action officers at the MLGRD on the competencies and expertise of records management personnel in records keeping. It was clear from the findings that numerous respondents to the skills and competencies question felt that records management officers were not knowledgeable in records keeping. They also specifically bemoaned a lack of skills in the management of digital records. Lamented by action officers, as expected, the study revealed that an overwhelming 27/38 (70%) respondents of those interviewed and those that responded to questionnaires suggested that they were not competent in the management of paper or digital records to conform to the expected international standards, especially electronic records. Moreover, 38/38 (100%) of these respondents stated that they did not think that RMU staff were capable of effectively managing e-records. These findings imply that upskilling is a necessity to enable RMU staff to meet their obligations in their line of work. These findings are depicted in Figure 1. Figure 1 illustrates the MLGRD’s RMU staff’s records management competencies.

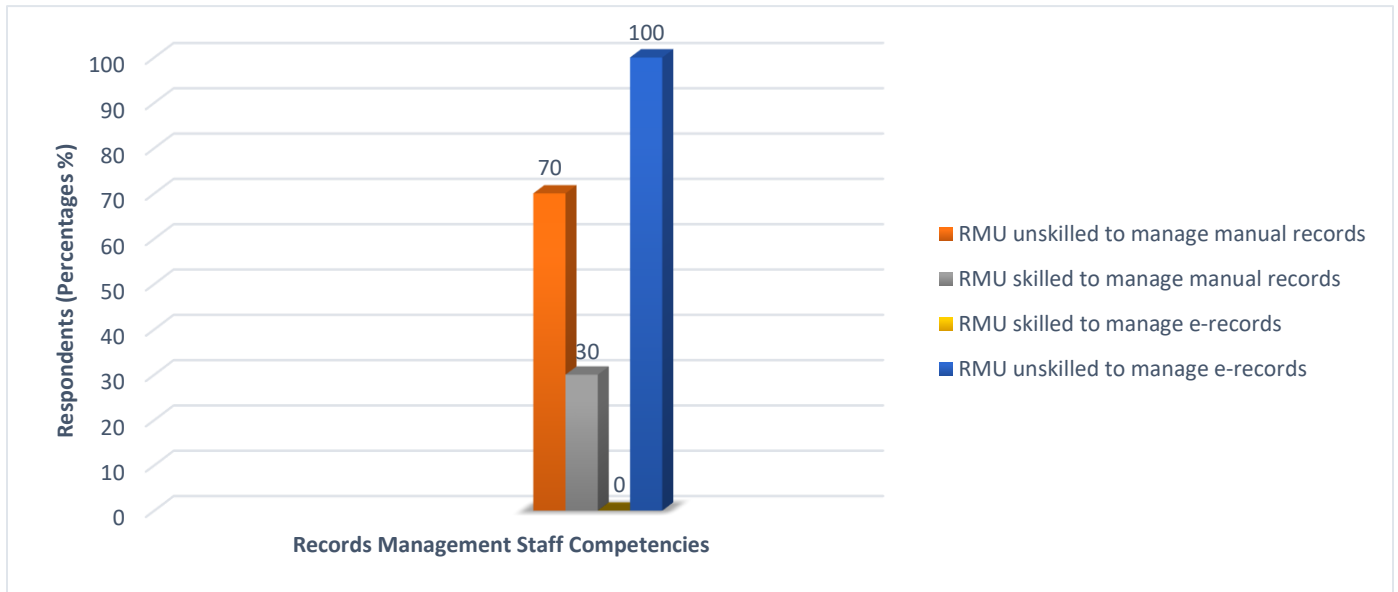


Figure 1: RMU Staff Competencies

The findings in Figure 1 indicated that the MLGRD lacked skilled and competent personnel in records management. Sibanda and Mupfuri (2021) opine that without proper training on records management practices and the way employees should be undertaking records management, staff will do their work without uniformity, which could lead to poor records keeping. Not only is focus restricted to traditional records management practices, but also directed at the current trends such as digital records. In their study,

Ngoepe, Jacobs and Mojapelo (2022) recommend the inclusion of computational archival science in the responsive curriculum to enable graduates to acquire skills in the application of technological tools, methods and resources pertaining to digital records processing, analysis, storage, long-term preservation and access. Therefore, including digital records management-related modules in higher learning institutions' curricula is of paramount importance, as it would equip learners with skills to match the state of the current RMU, which is either a hybrid office or an office that is transitioning towards a digital platform. Through document analysis, the study showed that the aspect of skilled personnel in the field of records management was not inculcated into any regulatory framework informing organisations on key attributes aligned to good records keeping. Therefore, without any binding legislative and regulatory frameworks, efforts to effectively manage records, most importantly digital records, are cumbersome and futile. Frameworks purposively reviewed were the Botswana National Archives and Records Services Act (2007) and the Electronic Records (evidence) Act (2014).

## 5.2 Technologies and infrastructure supporting records management

Since open government has been driven by an online presence and online initiatives, digital records are automatically created and required to be effectively managed. To successfully manage e-records, appropriate infrastructure cannot be overemphasised. According to Asogwa, Ezeani and Asogwa (2021), a study conducted on e-records management on African university libraries revealed that ICT facilities were insufficient in the management of e-records. The study also found that there was a system used by the MLGRD to manage e-records. However, respondents who were familiar with the system used were unconvinced of its capabilities and generally deemed the system as inadequate. According to Mosweu and Ngoepe (2021), several studies generally discovered that there was a lack of infrastructure and guidance for the management of digital records in Botswana. Similarly, there was “a lack of defined records management and e-archiving infrastructure” in the public service in Botswana (Moloi 2009:114). In spite of this, several authors (Ngoepe & Keakopa 2011; Ramokate 2010; Bagudu & Sadiq 2013) indicated that an automated system assists in the management of digital records and the competitive positioning of organisations that is a necessity to grow and that such particular systems are the main drivers in service efficiency and effectiveness if undertaken correctly.

The researcher heard from the respondents that there was poor network connectivity and obsolete hardware and software at the MLGRD. The respondents unanimously agreed that there was inadequate technology at the MLGRD that may enable open government. The results showed that 76% of respondents did not know of any technology available, while a mere 24% was aware of its presence. Figure 2 illustrates the status of ICT infrastructure at the MLGRD.

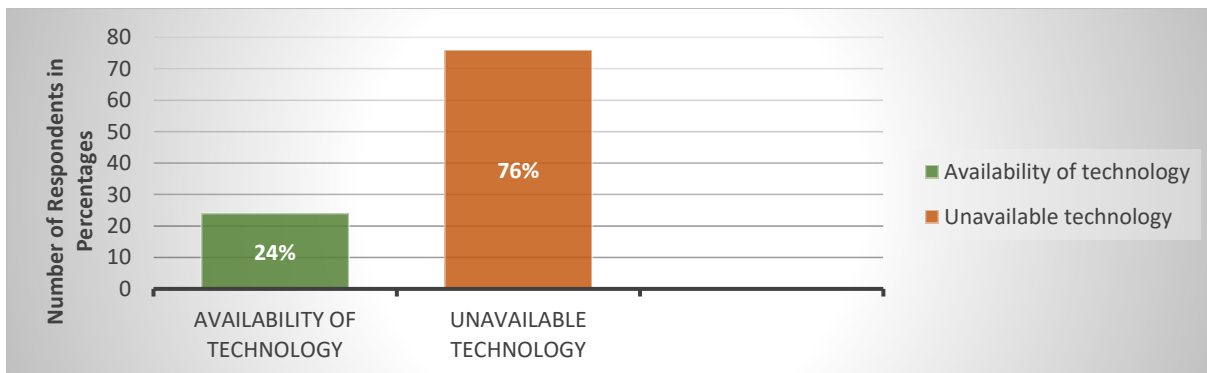


Figure 2: ICT infrastructure



Figure 2 shows that 76% of the respondents were unaware of ICTs in use while 24% knew about ICTs used in the MLGRD. Furthermore, it seems those that identified the availability of various software applications, in particular SharePoint, constituted 24% and were specifically IT personnel.

## 6. Recommendations

This study found that although open government initiatives in Botswana were ICT based, the status of records management in the MLGRD showed inadequacies. Therefore, the following recommendations are made:

### **Skills and competencies**

Records management personnel do provide services, although it is not enough considering the digitised records and how they are perceived to be dealt with. Digital records management is a job that needs trained and skilled personnel, but there seems to be a lack of those on the African continent (Chigariro & Khumalo 2018; Marutha & Ngoepe 2017; Mosweu & Ngoepe 2019; Asogwa 2012). Therefore, it is recommended that RMU staff be upskilled in general records management and, specifically, digital records management. Several higher learning institutions offer academic courses on records and archives management, with the University of Botswana being the highest university in the country providing improved courses covering aspects of electronic records management and computer usage (Keakopa 2018).

### **Legislative and regulatory frameworks**

For successful access to records, these records should be manned by skilled individuals with the relevant academic qualifications. It can only be successful through the enactment of clauses speaking to that. The researcher recommends that laws should include the enforcement of skilled personnel through clauses infused in already existing Acts to cater for improving records-keeping practices.

### **Technologies and infrastructure supporting records management**

The Government of Botswana should revisit their e-government drive geared towards ensuring that the government ministries and departments are converged online to improve service delivery. Through the e-government drive, ICT infrastructural needs will be addressed, including but not limited to, the acquisition of relevant digital records management systems. According to Malanga and Kamanga (2019), considerations should be made prior to the planned implementation of e-government initiatives because there is a need for a thorough assessment of capacity, such as the ICT infrastructure and human resources to determine if organisations are e-records ready. Therefore, a suitable system for any organisation to manage records consistently is an electronic records management system (ERMS) through which open government can be realised (Hawash, Mokhtar & Yusof 2019).

## 7. Conclusions

ICTs facilitating open government are accompanied by the creation of digital records, and proper synergies are required to successfully manage digital records. Thus, it is imperative to continually upskill records and archives managers to enable them to adequately execute their duties in digital age. These professionals need to keep abreast of technological changes lest they are left behind and unable to provide information access. This study revealed that managers in the MLGRD are ill equipped to manage digital records (records in any format). Therefore, without good records management skills, it would be difficult to attain sufficient openness through the open government initiatives developed by the Government of Botswana. The current research intended to explore the role of records management in open government at the MLGRD. Therefore, the study findings can be used to inform the Botswana government on the development of the

necessary support structures to ensure that records management is executed by those with the right skill set, especially enforcing through regulatory frameworks. Furthermore, more research can be undertaken that looks at regulatory frameworks governing information access as a driving tool to open government.

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