

Keeping to your lane: Resolving the impasse between records and ICT officers in managing email

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Abstract

There has been a sharp rise in the use of electronic mail (email) in public organisations owing to its low cost, ease of use, and speed of transmission of information, among other advantages. This enhanced public service delivery in an era when clients are increasingly calling for public accountability and improved service delivery. While the use of electronic mail seems to be attractive in many respects, there is contention over who is or should be responsible for managing email records in an organisation. Informed by the skills theory, this study holds that acquisition of requisite skills and competencies is a necessary condition for excellence in job performance, productivity, and service delivery. This mixed methods research approach used a convergent research design where 240 records, administration, and information and communication technology officers from 12 government ministries completed questionnaires while 10 officers were interviewed. The interviewees comprised seven National Archives of Zimbabwe archivists, the director of the National Archives of Zimbabwe, one administration director, and one information and communication technology director from Zimbabwe's central government. Data were further solicited using personal observation and document reviews. Ethical considerations such as seeking consent from participants, obtaining authorisation from organisations, and anonymising participants were observed in the study. The study established that information and communication technology officers were mostly entrusted with managing email records ahead of records officers, an arrangement which the study regards as rather misplaced. A collaboration matrix was proposed where records officers work as email records managers while information and communication technology officers work as email system enablers, thus emphasising the importance of each "keeping to their lane."

Keywords: email, email management, email managers, email records, email systems enablers, skills

1. Introduction

The responsibility for the management of electronic records in an organisation is rather complicated and differs from that of paper records. In the case of paper records, officers in the records section or department are responsible for managing records of their organisation. However, in the case of electronic records, specifically electronic mail (email), records may be sent directly to a recipient who can act on the message, archive, or destroy it without the knowledge and involvement of records officers of the organisation. In this regard, action officers become the *de facto* email records managers. In some cases, information and

communication technology (ICT) officers who are responsible for setting up and configuring electronic information systems end up working as email records managers, while in many cases, different officers manage email without the involvement of records officers of the organisation. This raises the question “Who should be responsible for managing email records of an organisation?”

Email is divided into official and non-official email. Official email is correspondence that is generated or received in the course of official business of the organisation (Mutsagondo & Tsvuura 2017). Such email includes policies, memoranda, directives, work schedules, agendas, directives, reports, and minutes (National Archives and Records Service of South Africa (NARSSA) 2006). Non-official email may be personal email, which has nothing to do with the organisation, or it may be ephemeral correspondence, which has no relevance to the organisation (Sigauke, Nengomasha & Chabikwa 2016). This may include announcements of social events, junk mail, or personal messages. While non-official email is destroyed, official email is captured in the records management system of the organisation in the same manner as paper records are captured, filed, and archived. In many cases, the thorny issue is not about how to separate official from non-official email, but is rather about who should do the separation, capturing, filing, appraisal, preservation, and disposal of the emails. The case of Zimbabwe’s central government brings interesting scenarios from which records and information professionals may learn and refine allocation of duties vis-à-vis issues of skills and competency.

This study is set in the context of Zimbabwe’s central government. Zimbabwe’s public service is divided into central government, local authorities, and subsidiary bodies (Government of Zimbabwe 2013). The tier of interest in this article, central government, comprises of government ministries and departments. There are 22 government ministries and all of them have their head offices in Harare, the capital city of the country. These ministries have departments like information and communication technology, administration, records and information management, human resources, and finance, among others. The multiplicity of departments, coupled with no official standing position regarding who is responsible for managing email, has resulted in different ministries allocating responsibility for managing email to different officers.

The use of email for communication is on the rise in many organisations, for example, in provincial public departments (Mutsagondo & Tsvuura 2017), government ministries (Mutsagondo 2021), national governments (Nengomasha 2012), banks (Chihambakwe, Wutete & Sigauke 2017), universities (Sigauke et al. 2016) and private companies (Rakemane & Serema 2018). This resulted in the rise of official email records, which deserve to be managed properly and professionally. Nonetheless, management of email, which Seow, Chennupati and Foo (2005) view as the worst managed form of record at the turn of the 21st century, has been traceable in part to personnel entrusted with managing such records.

2. Theoretical framework

The study is informed by the theoretical framework of the skills theory. Popularised by Kurt Fischer, in the early 1980s, the skills theory advances that people should possess relevant skills to be effective in their jobs (King & Hecke 2006). The theory is the antithesis of the trait theory, which spells out that some people are born leaders, which makes them naturally good in many roles regardless of acquiring relevant skills as precondition for optimal performance. The skills theory advances that skills like technical, conceptual, and human skills are necessary, although it is not a sufficient condition for people to operate effectively and efficiently. Such skills are

normally acquired through education, training, and experience (Taie 2014). The skills theory was relevant in the study as it helped to shed light on the importance of skills acquisition as a precondition for effective and efficient operation as an email records manager. In short, the gist of the skills theory is that relevant training is a basis for effective job performance and service delivery. It is the contention of this study that allocation of responsibility to manage email records should be informed by skills that different personnel possess.

3. Research problem

While the rise in the use of email in organisations has been hailed for efficiency, effectiveness, and economy in communication, sending, and receiving records and information, there is contention as to who should be responsible for managing email records of an organisation. Studies by Mutsagondo and Tsvuura (2017) and as Rakemane and Serema (2018) revealed that email records are often managed by ICT officers ahead of the conventional records officers, despite ICT officers' lack of records management skills. At the same time, studies by Luyombya (2010) and Mutsagondo (2017) showed the prevalence of bad relations between records and ICT officers, as they compete for relevance and space in managing electronic records, particularly email records. In accordance with the skills theory and the ISO 15489 records management standard, allocation of records management duties is supposed to be done in line with skills and competencies of respective officers (Taie 2014; ISO 15489 2016). It is the contention of this paper that although email involves both records and ICT skills, management should clearly demarcate respective officers' responsibilities where collaboration rather than competition is encouraged and upheld.

4. Purpose of the study

The study seeks to resolve the impasse between records and ICT officers as far as the management of email records is concerned with a view to encourage collaboration without interference between the two groups of officers.

5. Objectives of the study

The study sought to:

- determine who manages email records in Zimbabwe's Central Government
- establish why certain officers are given responsibility for managing email records ahead of others.
- advance a proposal to resolve the impasse between records and ICT officers in managing email records.

6. Literature review

A thematic approach to literature review was used in this study where literature was reviewed in line with the three objectives of the study. Cases and examples from the international and local scenes were used in reviewing literature.

6.1 Personnel responsible for managing email in organisations

Authors such as Matangira (2016), Mosweu (2019), Mutsagondo and Khumalo (2023) and Ngoepe (2017) state that records in general are often managed by unqualified staff. This is

caused by many factors like shortage of qualified manpower, lack of records management policy, and the negative attitude and perceptions of senior management regarding the records management function, among other factors. This often results in records being stashed in boxes and heaped on floors, tables, and desks without any form of classification and filing. This complicates retrieval of and access to such records. In some cases, records are lost, thus affecting service delivery and denting management's ability to make informed decisions (Majenda & Dewah 2019).

In the case of email records, studies such as those done by Mutsagondo and Tsvuura (2017) and Mutsagondo (2021) revealed that email records are more often managed by ICT officers rather than records officers. This raised policy relevance issues, as such studies questioned records management competencies and credentials of such officers. This apparent and pronounced lack of skills for managing records in different formats is the antithesis of international records management standards like ISO 15489. The standard holds that personnel responsible for creating, capturing, and managing records in any format should be competent to be able to perform records and information management duties as assigned or expected (ISO 15489 2016). The standard also advances that records and information management competencies should be evaluated regularly in line with changing trends in the field. This means that, in addition to general records management skills and competencies, records managers should be capacitated to manage ICT-generated records, including email records. It is unfortunate that many countries in the developing world lack ICT skills (Olatokun & Opesade 2008).

6.2 Reasons for giving ICT officers email management responsibilities

Some studies indicated who was responsible for managing email and they as well as reasons why such personnel were given such responsibilities. Brenneman (2017) states that in the American state of North Carolina, email is managed by government records analysts who are also responsible for writing records retention schedules and identifying records of historical value. Rakemane and Serema (2018) hold that at the Companies and Intellectual Property Authority in Botswana, email is managed by ICT officers, although the authors agree that there was little justification for that. Mutsagondo (2017) reveals that email in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe was mostly managed by ICT officers, followed by records officers. In the latter two cases above, ICT officers were given such responsibility because email involved many ICT issues where ICT skills mattered most. Keakopa (2008) advances that both ICT and records management skills are required in managing email. The management of records in general involves practices like acquisition, receipt and generation, maintenance, appraisal, preservation, and disposal of records. Scholars like Mutsagondo and Tsvuura (2017) and Mutsagondo (2021) hold that many ICT officers do not have records management skills while, at the same time, many records officers do not have polished ICT skills. This calls for a balance in between.

6.3 Shared responsibility between records management and ICT officers

There have been cases of hostile relations between records and ICT officers in pursuit of managing records generated in electronic environments. In a study by Mutsagondo (2017) on electronic records management in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe, 44% of records officers indicated that they did not have good relations with ICT officers, as they clashed disagreed in their discharge of duties. The study also revealed that although ICT officers sometimes managed electronic records, they harboured negative perceptions of the records functional area.

One of the ICT officers was quoted as saying “You cannot expect me to go back to college and learn records management. I am a full professional in my own right”. At the same time, one records officer accused ICT officers of being overzealous in their work as he said, “They think they know everything and better than everyone. This is killing [sic] our beloved profession, as we have to work together with them” (Mutsagondo 2017:89). Luyombya (2010) also notes the impasse between records and ICT officers in Uganda where the two were not working together in tackling records management problems. Ndenje-Sichalwe (2010) comments on this scenario that such behaviour was negated the records continuum concept, which called for collaboration between different professionals in pursuit of excellence in managing records in any format.

Management records in electronic environments is a shared responsibility (Keakopa 2008; State Records Office of Western Australia 2009). Thus, once competent and qualified staff member is identified and deployed in an organisation, who should bear the burden of training other officers within the organisation in basic records management. In pursuit of sharing the responsibility for managing records in electronic form, where the records managers play the central role, ISO 15489 states that management of records should be incorporated into an organisation’s staff induction and training policy to ensure compliance by all members of staff.

7. Research methodology

In this mixed methods research, data were solicited from 240 questionnaire respondents and 10 interviewees. The study used the “QUANT + qual notation”, which shows the dominance of quantitative data over qualitative data (Creswell & Creswell 2018). It also used the convergent mixed methods research design, also called the parallel or concurrent research design (Molina-Arizon & Fetters 2016). As Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) argue, in convergent research designs, both quantitative and qualitative data are collected separately before findings are compared in order to determine how they confirm or disconfirm each other. The two data sets were collected separately between 4 November 2019 and 20 April 2020. Questionnaire respondents included records officers, administration officers, and ICT officers (also referred to as information technology officers (ITOs)) from 12 out of 22 government ministries in Zimbabwe. The study targeted records, administration, and ICT officers in Zimbabwe’s central government who numbered 660 from which 240 officers were chosen through stratified random sampling returned questionnaires. These officers were purposively selected for their active roles in email records management within the Government of Zimbabwe. In addition, 10 informants comprising seven National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) archivists, the director of the NAZ, an administration director from one government ministry, and an ICT director from one government ministry participated as interviewees. Personal observation by the researchers and document reviews were also used in soliciting data. Microsoft Excel 2010® and descriptive statistics were used to analyse quantitative data while Atlas.ti® was used to thematically analyse qualitative data.

8. Results and discussions

The first objective of the study was to identify personnel responsible for managing email records in Zimbabwe’s central government. A total of 162 (67%) respondents indicated that email was managed by ICT officers, 48 (20%) stated that it was managed by records officers, 19 (8%) stated it was managed by administration officers, seven (3%) stated it was managed by human resources officers, while four (2%) indicated “Other officers”. Figure 1 shows the findings more succinctly.

Mutsagondo

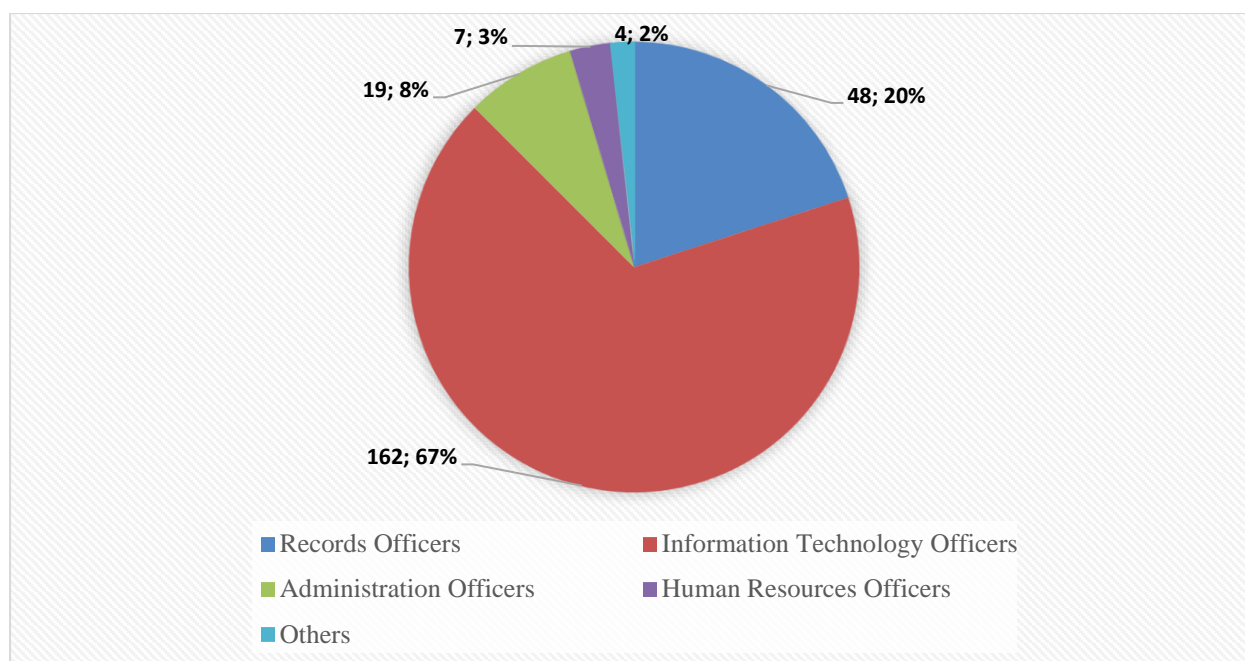


Figure 1: Officers responsible for managing email records

The fact that email records were mostly managed by ICT officers, followed by records officers, was also supported by five (71.4%) of the seven NAZ archivists. They also acknowledged the role played by administration officers and heads of departments in managing email records in Zimbabwe's central government. Document reviews in the form of two records survey reports from two different government ministries also indicated that ICT officers were mostly responsible for managing email, despite the fact that the reports questioned their eligibility and suitability for the job. Cases where ICT officers are assigned to manage email rather than records officers have also been seen at the Companies and Intellectual Property Authority in Botswana (Rakemane & Serema 2018) and in public departments in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe (Mutsagondo & Tsvuura 2017). Nonetheless, there was little rationale for such an arrangement.

When asked why such a scenario existed, the majority of NAZ archivists (6: 85.7%) indicated that there was no government policy in place regarding allocation of email records management duties. Each ministry therefore selected officers of their choice to take care of the management of email as they saw fit and as circumstances dictated. Lapses in records management policies are commonplace in many developing countries. Magama (2018) and Maseh and Mosei (2019) observe that there were no proper electronic records management policies and guidelines in place to cater for the professional management of electronic records in many developing countries. Scholars such as Mutsagondo and Tsvuura (2017) and Nengomasha (2009) hold that the absence of policy on allocation of official duties normally results in haphazard and questionable allocation of duties. A study conducted by Mutsagondo and Katekwe (2022) blamed scenarios where organisations embarked on electronic records management programmes before relevant electronic records policies were put in place. They compared the situation to placing the cart before the horse.

The second objective of the study was to establish the rationale for assigning email management responsibilities mostly to ICT officers. The 162 respondents who indicated that email records were mostly managed by ICT officers gave the following reasons for this: a total of 96 out of 162 (59%) respondents indicated that it is generally believed that since email

management involves more ICT skills than records management skills; therefore, ICT officers are better placed to manage such records. Forty-four (27%) respondents held that the responsibility for managing email was just given to ICT officers by senior management although there was little justification for this decision. Nineteen (12%) respondents indicated that the responsibility was mostly given to ICT officers because records officers were mostly comfortable to take the initiative.

Four out of the seven NAZ officers (57%) who participated in interviews stated that it was not proper to give email management responsibilities to ICT officers. For them, email is a record and all records are the responsibility of records officers of the organisation. Thus, all records are supposed to be managed by records officers regardless of their format. One principal archivist had this to say:

IT officers straddle into records officers' domain and this breeds confusion within government circles. It should be noted that IT officers have ICT skills and not records management skills and this is why email is poorly managed as official records. There is need for a policy to make sure officers stick to their respective areas of speciality.

Duty allocation is a strategic issue which involves input from senior management of organisations. ISO 15489-1 (2016) spells out that the responsibility for the creation, capturing, and management of records in an organisation should be clearly defined, promulgated, and assigned. It also states that the involvement of senior management is called for and there should be valid reasons for assigning responsibilities to different personnel. As a result, the study asked directors of the NAZ and from central government to find out why responsibility for managing email records was a contentious issue. Firstly, the director of the NAZ indicated that issues of skills and training should be considered in determining who manages what. He stated:

Government should consider training and skills in allocating duties to different officers. Email is a record and as such falls under the purview of records officers. If it so happens that records officers have deficiencies here and there in managing email, they should be given due training rather than sidelining them for non-records professionals which may not bring forth the best results.

The director of the NAZ is responsible for the administration of the National Archives of Zimbabwe Act, a legal instrument for the management of records in any format in Zimbabwe. Secondly, the administration director from central government concurred that email records were mostly managed by ICT officers, while paper records were mostly managed by records officers. She defended the decision stating that ICT officers had superior ICT skills that were necessary in managing email records. Nonetheless, she added that ICT officers were supposed to work closely with records officers to effectively manage email since records officers had better knowledge of records management. The administration director is the head of the records management function in government ministries in Zimbabwe since the records section falls within the administration department. For the ICT director, the reigning set-up where ICT officers were tasked with managing email records worked well. He stated that his staff set up the electronic systems on which email worked and, as a result, such personnel were better placed to manage email records. However, when asked about their competencies in managing records, the ICT director admitted that ICT officers were somewhat flawed but went on to reiterate that this could not stop them from performing their email management duties.

The last objective of the study was to advance a proposal to resolve the impasse between records and ICT officers in managing email records. This study was underpinned by the theoretical framework of the skills theory. King and Hecke (2006) hold that people should possess relevant skills for them to be effective in their jobs. The issue of relevant skills obtained through education, training, and experience is pertinent here. For skills theorists, possession of relevant skills is a necessary though not sufficient condition for people to operate at optimum levels in line with expectation. Thus, if email is considered a record, it follows that relevant records management skills like records receipt, classification, filing, appraisal, maintenance, preservation, and disposal are pertinent if the job is to be done properly and professionally. Other skills may come in as a bonus. In accordance with the skills theory, responsibility for managing email falls in the hands of records officers. Job specialisation, an approach that evolved from the concept of division of labour, is important. Scholars such as Staats and Gino (2010) hold that job specialisation increases output, saves time, and leads to innovation and creativity. In the context of this study, government would reap more benefits if records and ICT officers stick to their respective areas of specialisation.

Email records call for records management skills and ICT skills. Such a dual nature of email records thus calls for hybridisation of skills between records and ICT officers but without the two interfering with each other's business. This study proposes that records officers and ICT officers should work together in pursuit of excellence in managing email records where records officers work as managers and ICT officers as enablers of ICT or email systems. A total of 90 out of 240 (37.5%) respondents and three (42.9%) informants saw collaboration and shared responsibility as the way forward. One senior archivist said:

It is practically impossible to find a records officer with superb ICT skills and an ICT officer with superb records management skills. These officers should meet somewhere along the line, with each officer contributing significantly according to his or her area of specialisation.

The study therefore recommends capacity building for both records and ICT officers where records officers have up-to-date records management skills and basic ICT skills, while ICT officers have up-to-date ICT skills and basic records management skills.

Three (43%) archivists expressed that collaboration is possible, but only when management encourages it to eliminate competition between the two. Figure 2 shows a collaboration matrix where records officers and ICT officers may individually contribute towards excellence in email records management.

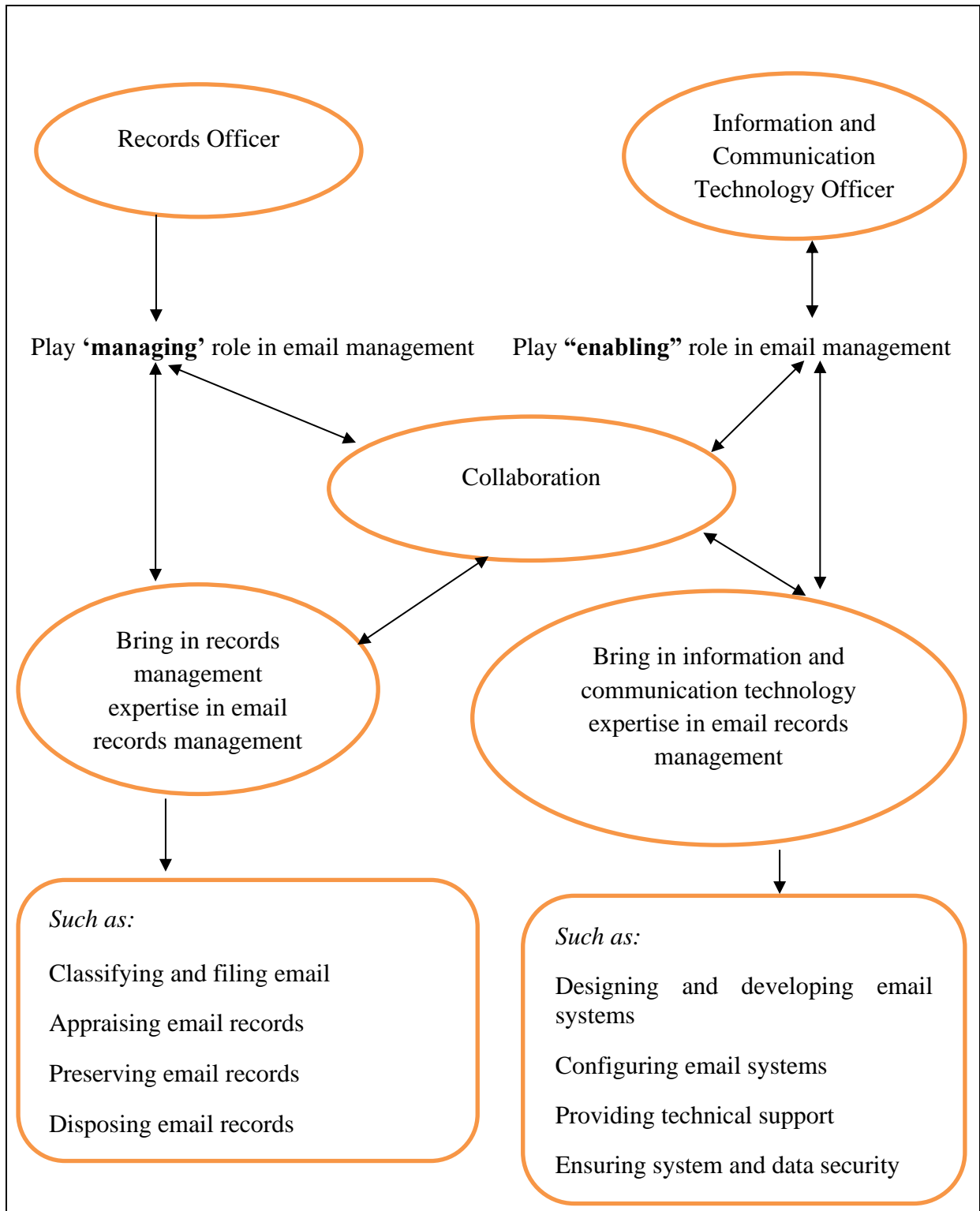


Figure 2: Records-ICT officers’ collaboration matrix

While records officers can bring in their specialised skills like classification, appraisal, preservation, and disposal of email, ICT officers can bring in email designing and configuration skills as well as provision and securing of data and email systems. The position of this article

is that records officers should be “email records managers” while ICT officers should be “email and email system enablers”. While sticking to their areas of specialisation, the two categories of officers still work towards a common goal for the common good. Each should keep to their skill set to avoid a scenario where records and ICT officers fight for space and relevance as far as the management of email is concerned.

9. Conclusion

The study largely showed that ICT officers were mostly tasked with the responsibility to manage email records, with records officers closely following. Issues of ICT skills were emphasised more than records management skills in assigning personnel responsible for managing email records in Zimbabwe’s central government. However, there was little justification why ICT personnel were assigned the responsibility for managing email records ahead of records officers. In accordance with the skills theory, relevant skills should be benchmarked, which spells out who manages what and why. The dual nature of skills for email management and configuration calls for collaborative skills between records and ICT officers, but with each officer specialising in their own domain. The skills collaboration matrix shows that each of the two groups of officers has a part to play without interference or competition.

Declarations

Authors declare that:

- There was no conflict of interest in this research.
- The manuscript has not been previously published and is not under consideration for publication with any other journal or copyrighted publishing platform of any kind.
- Permission was granted for collection and publication of the presented identifiable data from target organisation.
- I sought permission for copyright from third parties by obtaining the necessary permission from the copyright holder/s to reproduce their materials in different media in the article, such as tables, diagrams, and photographs owned by them.
- Author takes responsibility to keep participants’ information confidential, as required by legislation, including the Protection of Personal Information Act.
- Author gives consent to the Journal of South African Society of Archivist to publish the manuscript.

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