

RECORDS MANAGEMENT AND PRIVATE SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract: This article begins by examining the role of records management in private organizations. It identifies the major reason why organizations ought to manage their records effectively and efficiently. Its major emphasis is that a sound records management programme is a pre-requisite to quality management system programme. Records it, argues is the lifeblood of the organization, and failure to manage records is not just a minor lapse in administrative work, but is a case of bad management. It outlines the broad areas that must be included in a sound records management.

INTRODUCTION

In the past, the management of recorded information in many organizations has received inadequate attention from management. Many organizations are still unaware of the value of recorded information to their business. Records management, that is that area of administration concerned with the efficient and economical management of recorded information can significantly contribute to the overall performance of the business. In order to understand and appreciate the value of recorded organization information, it is of vital importance to understand the definition of records as used in this article. Records are documents or information created or received by the organization irrespective of the physical format or medium in which the information is contained. Moreover, it must be borne in mind that it is more or less like organisms in that they have a life cycle. Records:

- Are created or received in the organization in the course of day to day business activities (born);
- Have to be maintained in file cabinets, indexed, circulated, retrieved etc (they grow and move about); and
- Are disposed of when no longer needed (they die, are sent to the archives or cremated (burnt), or recycled and made into new paper).

When a records management programme is in place, records pass through this process

smoothly. But where these programmes are lacking, records are created unnecessarily, are not easily located when needed, records which are no longer needed to support the day to day activities of the organization are retained when they should have been disposed of.

WHY ORGANIZATIONAL RECORDS MUST BE MANAGED

Many organization fail to recognize that records are a valuable asset. Menkus, an information consultant argues that failure by many managers to recognize information as an asset stems from the fact that information assets are intangible and that they do not appear as identifiable items on the organization's profit and loss account.¹ It cannot be overstated that in this era of competitiveness, only those organizations that effectively utilize information, will be able to survive. A survey of record keeping practices in some organizations in Botswana revealed some of the following weaknesses:

- Poor registry layout thus hampering the smooth flow of information in and out of the registry;
- Untidiness in the records area with records piled on top of filing cabinets, basements, stores, corridors, corners, underneath the stairs and sometimes along corridors;

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¹ Menkus, B. (1989) "The Employee's Role in Protecting Information Assets," *Computers and Security*, Vol. 8, p. 488.

- Bulky files with torn covers and in many instances the file covers are poorly labeled, torn or poorly designed;
- Regular loss of files or papers removed from the mail folder;
- Old and ununlockable filing equipment;
- Lack of file indexes. In most cases, the file index is a mere listing of files irrespective of whether the files are active or inactive;
- Lack of control of file movements in and out of the registries. Some officers collect files from the registry without the knowledge of registry staff or they pass files borrowed from the registry to colleagues without notifying the registry;
- Lack of procedures for file closure. Files are only closed when they are too bulky, while files, which do not grow, remain active for considerable long period of time;
- Lack of retention and disposition schedules showing when records should be transferred to low cost storage areas, the archives or disposed of completely;
- Lack of bring forward diaries which results in officers locking files in their drawers as they are not sure the files will be availed to them later;
- Poor file classification or no classification system or use of several classification systems in the same registry;
- Poor or no supervision of registry staff. In some cases the registries have been turned into tea clubs.
- Ignorance on the value of information; for instance lack of security procedures in handling sensitive or classified information;
- Papers not found quickly where speed is essential, leading to the creation of mini-registries by senior officers who fear the loss of valuable information to support their operations;
- Large areas occupied by semi-current and non-current records. In most cases records are simply dumped on the floor or on shelves without any order or lists indicating what is held in the stores.
- Introduction of computerized records keeping systems as a way of addressing records keeping problems in the registries and especially in the personnel and financial registries. In most cases this is done without adequate analysis of the problems plaguing registries.

As a consequence of the failure to manage records effectively, both managers and clerical staff waste valuable time searching for information. The result of all this is what J. H. Simes an Assistant Keeper at the Scottish Office once described "... in the main these are congestion, frustration and expenses. Congestion when storerooms become cluttered up; frustration when things can not be found quickly; and expense when staff time is squandered needlessly in searching for information which should be readily at hand."² In one of the West African countries, one government official commented that "many senior public officers do not feel embarrassed when they cannot find contract agreements, project documents and the like. They are quite happy to blame junior clerks and continue as before."³ Is this what is happening in your office?

Secondly it has been observed that Western markets are now insisting on conducting business with ISO certified organizations. Apparently, many of our local organizations are unaware of the ISO record keeping requirements. Section 4.16 of ISO 9001 clearly stipulates that:

The supplier shall establish and maintain documented procedures for identification, collection, indexing, access, filing, storage, maintenance and disposition of quality records... All quality records shall be legible and shall be stored and retained in such a way that they are

2 Simes J H (1983) "Records Management: Is it Really Necessary," *Records Management* 7, London: Records Management Group of the Society of Archivists, p.9
 3 *ACARM Newsletter* No. 8 January 1990, p.11

retrievable in facilities that provide suitable environment to prevent damage or deterioration and to prevent loss. Retention times of quality records shall be established and recorded.⁴

It is virtually impossible to operate a total quality system without establishing procedures for maintaining its records. Records provide us with a solid base for documenting past decisions, identifying past successes and failures, establishing reasons for those successes and failures, and providing us with clues as to where we should be going. As can be seen from the above quotation, ISO regulations specifically require organizations to develop and document procedures for:

- Determining what records should be created, what information needs to be included in the records and what level of accuracy is required;
- Deciding in what form and structure such records should be created and captured;
- Determining requirements for retrieving and using records and how long they should be kept to satisfy those requirements;
- Deciding how to organize records so as to support those requirements for use;
- Ensuring that records are created and maintained in accordance with these requirements;
- Preserving the records and making them accessible over time, in order to meet business and community requirements; and
- Complying with legal and regulatory requirements, applicable standards and organizational policy.

The only way to meet all the above requirements is through the development and implementation of a records management programme.

Thirdly, each organization requires records for effective decision-making. Records provide evidence of past decisions and practices and are a reliable source for public accountability, transparency and good governance. Effective decision-making is dependent upon reliable, complete, and timely information. Regrettably to say, many managers are often called upon to take decisions on unreliable and incomplete information, or information becomes available after decisions have been made. As Dr. Justus Wamukoya from Moi University, Kenya points out "access to well managed records and information is among the vital ingredients that make up efficient administration. Through the use of reliable records and information, the government can enhance its ability to formulate, implement and sustain effective policies."⁵

The value of records was further emphasized by John Macdonald from the National Archives of Canada who argues that "records are the foundation for the management of knowledge i.e. the planned exploitation of an organization's information holdings in order to achieve competitive advantage or in the case of government institutions, to maximize the value of services to society."⁶

Fourthly, it cannot be overemphasized that the maintenance of records is governed by law. To day many organizations are unaware of the many laws and regulations that demand the maintenance of records. Within the public sector, financial regulations, The Public Archives Act, The Employment Act, the statutes of limitation, and many others demand that records be maintained and availed for inspection whenever they are needed. For instance, the payment of pension and other terminal benefits require that records of

⁴ Botswana Standard BOS ISO 9001:1994 *Quality Systems- Model for Quality Assurance in Design, Development, Production, Installation and Servicing*, Gaborone: Botswana Bureau of Standards, p.8
Wamukoya J (1994) "Administrative Reforms and national Archives in Africa", *Information Development*, Vol. 3, p.204

⁵ Macdonald J (1998) "The Role and position of Records Management in Government" Paper Presented to a Records Management seminar, Kuala Lumpur, 22nd June, p.3

⁶ Macdonald J., (1998) "The Role and Position of Records Management in Government" Paper Presented to a Records Management Seminar, Kuala Lumpur, 22nd June, p.4

engagement to the last day of an employee be available from the time of first employment.

Fifthly, managers must be involved in the management of records in order to be more accountable and transparent in their decisions and actions. No wonder John Macdonald of the Public Archives of Canada came to the conclusion that:

Records are the foundation for accountability and, within this context for good government and sound governance. At one level they permit government officials to account for their actions to their superiors. At another level records permit the organization as a whole to account for its actions either to the parent organization to which it reports or to society as a whole. Its accountability to society, however, can assume a number of different dimensions. At the level of the individual citizen, it can include the assurance provided that the rights of citizens will be protected, that the right of access by citizen to government information will be respected, and that the personal information provided to government institutions is secure.⁷

That records play a fundamental role in providing public accountability was further stressed in a recent publication by the International Records Management Trust, a records management consultancy firm based in the U.K when they wrote saying "the ability to remove ambiguity and firmly establish who did what, when, why and how is a powerful means of constraining individuals from engaging in corruption and enforcing accountability. Well managed records provide an unbiased and accurate account in recording responsibilities and therefore liability."⁸ As our societies become more aware of their rights, they will make greater demands to be shown the basis on which decisions are made. This is particularly so as we move towards the freedom of information where members of the public will not have to wait for twenty five years before public records can be made available to them for public scrutiny.

Sixthly, it is very important that administrators take a keen interest in the management of records, as this is the only resource that organizations can preserve their corporate memory for future generations. In the years to come, an organizations activities, operations and programs will be judged by the records that will have survived. No wonder one Canadian Archivist is known to have once remarked: "Of all the nation's assets, the archives are the most precious, they are the gift of one generation to another and the extent of our care of them marks the extent of our civilization."

Moreover, it is vital that managers be involved in the management of records so as to safeguard vital information relating to their specific operations. In life disasters cannot be ruled out. Disasters such as fire, floods vandalism etc are ever present. It is essential that organizations develop procedures for the identification and housing of some of their very valuable records which they might require during or after a disaster.

Finally, perhaps there is need today to control the creation and growth of records than ever before. The introduction of computers and other electronic devices into office environments has resulted in the generation and proliferation of paper records. The photocopier, the printers and other information duplicating processing has resulted in the creation of paper mountains in offices. Unless measures are taken to control the creation of records, most organizations will run out of space for storing their records.

THE WAY FORWARD

In what ways should organizations be involved in the management of records? The starting point is to get involved in the management of registries. For far too long registry personnel have been seen as 'second-class members' in the organizations. As has Horton and Lannon observed:

Management does not always understand nor appreciate records management and has

⁷ International Records Management Trust (1999) *Managing Financial Records*, London: International

⁸ Records Management Trust, p.8

traditionally placed the records management function to a low administrative level within the organization, and certainly not at par with management of information systems or library operations. It is often seen as those people who 'clean up our files or get boxes of old dirty records from the warehouse.' It is infrequently seen as those people who can help us conduct information flow analysis and requirement studies.⁹

In many offices, there is little discussion between senior administrators and registry personnel, and perhaps the only time when registry personnel ever get to discuss any matter with senior administrators is when a file cannot be located and the officer has been summoned to be told of his/her weaknesses and failures. There is need for greater dialogue between administrators and registry staff. If I may ask, when was the last time you discussed registry work with your clerks or tried to understand the problems the registry clerk might be experiencing? Have you discussed any suggestions with the registry clerk on how best the service could be improved? That improvements will only occur when senior management gets involved in the management of records was clearly demonstrated by a senior Ghanaian official when he said:

I am afraid records management will not improve much until Chief executives and the other senior officers appreciate the importance of registry clerks and custodians of files and the like and seriously question the present mode of recruitment, training and qualification and conditions of service.¹⁰

Secondly administrators can improve records keeping practices in their organizations by providing suitable storage space for their registries and clerical staff involved in managing records. Officers charged with the responsibility

of managing records need to work in suitable environment. Outdated and non-functional filing equipment must be removed from records rooms while security procedures for records rooms needs to be improved.

Thirdly training of records officers should be enhanced. It would be futile to attempt to operate an effective and efficient records system without skilled personnel. No wonder Donald Simpson advises "do not embark on a sea of records management with an inexperienced navigator and do not overlook the training that is needed to keep up advancement in the field."¹¹

⁹ Horton F W and Lannon K (1989) "Records Management and Information management: Are they having Fun To-ether," *Records Management Quarter* Vol. 23, p. 13

¹⁰ *ACARM Newsletter* No. 8 January 1990, p. 11

¹¹ Simpson D F (1975) "The Don'ts of Good Records Management Programme," *Records Management Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 1, p.2