

Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow: Management of Electronic Records at a South African Water Utility Company

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rand Water was one of the earliest institutions to introduce electronic records management in 1991. Over the period of three decades, there have been numerous changes at the institution, and within the South African legal framework, there is a need to transfer the digital records into archival custody. However, there is no infrastructure to ingest digital records into archival custody. This poses challenges to institutions such as Rand Water as they are forced to create an interim solution for electronic records preservation. The challenge is compounded by the fact that since implementing electronic systems, Rand Water has migrated to several products. There is a danger that some records might have been lost during migration. This chapter narrates on the electronic record-keeping within Rand Water from yesteryear to today in order to map the way for the future. It has established that Rand Water has implemented several ECMs and migrated to different products over the years. A further study on data loss and recoverability during migration to the different ECMs is recommended.

INTRODUCTION

The value of electronic records for business efficiency cannot be overlooked in almost all industries, including the water sector. This sector plays a vital role in ensuring that the people have access to clean water to survive on the daily basis and businesses can run efficiently. Organisations in the water sector are also among the many institutions that have implemented electronic records management to efficiently run its business. Water utility companies such as Rand Water has a rich history of records management dating back to the end of the 19th century just before it was established (Mohlabi, Ferreira, Mello, Mile & Maraba, 2015). The company is one of the earliest public institutions in South Africa to introduce electronic document and records management system (EDRMS) applications in the early 1990s. Over this period of three decades, there have been numerous changes and according to archival legislation in South Africa, procedurally, there is a need to transfer the digital records into archival custody. However, studies by Ngoepe and Keakopa (2011), Katuu (2012), Katuu and Ngoepe (2015), Ngoepe (2017), as well as Modiba, Ngoepe and Ngulube (2019) indicated that there is no infrastructure to ingest digital records into archival custody in South Africa. This poses serious challenges to organisations such as Rand Water as they are forced to preserve electronic records that are due for transfer to national archival custody even though they do not have the skills and mandate for this task. This challenge is compounded by the fact that since implementing EDRMS in the early 1990s, Rand Water has migrated to several EDRMS products from the original one. There is a danger that some records might have been lost during this migration process and recovery of such records might prove impossible. Although the records management practitioners at Rand Water have managed electronic records using the EDRMS applications, they face the challenge of preserving these records due to a lack of skills, infrastructure and mandate as indicated (Mello, 2020). This poses the danger of losing valuable historical records dating back to the late 1800s.

This chapter provides a historical narrative of the management of electronic records at Rand Water from yesteryear when the water utility company was established to today when electronic records management systems were implemented in order to map the way for tomorrow with the possible integration of systems to manage digital records efficiently. The chapter shares lessons learnt from Rand Water in terms of records management with the transition from paper-based to digital records management. This is so as many organisations in South Africa are still grappling with implementing digital records systems. Digital records are either stored in an enterprise resource planning (ERP) system or electronic content management (ECM) system, or managed without the benefit of either system (Stancic, Ngoepe & Mukwevho, 2019). In many organisations, including Rand Water, ECM and ERP systems have

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