

Chapter 11

Electronic Records Management in Africa: Problems and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

Poor records management has caused serious impediments in several aspects of public sector. This has negatively affected prompt payments and employment practices, revamping of government functions and organizational structures, strengthening of financial management and the national legal and regulatory framework. In the absence of a culture of records management, monitoring and evaluation, quality control, and verification cannot proceed as a well-kept record provide the basis for all these, which also engender the rule of law and accountability. They are the foundation upon which a nation may build programs for good governance, poverty reduction, equitable justice, financial accountability, enforceable civil rights, etc. It is imperative, therefore, for government officials to adopt good records keeping practices, since this will support effective, transparent and accountable government. Accessible and reliable records will show what decisions were made, actions taken, people who were involved and the rights and responsibilities that exists. African countries are faced with several challenges in managing records, particularly electronic records. These border on technology obsolescence, inadequate trained personnel, policy formulation and implementation, etc. These have made the structure, content and context of records to be altered indiscriminately. Adopting integrated electronic information systems in government and organisation's transactions, electronic records management policy formulation and implementation, establishing more training outlet for records managers and archivists, developing meta-data for locating records, etc. will go a long way in adequately managing electronic records in Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

Records are fundamental tools in the business of government and their absence can lead to inefficiency or failure in operational procedures. The absence of records can open government employees to accusations of fraud and impropriety, political embarrassment and inability to defend the state in cases of legal actions or claims against the government. Records are evidence of organizational transactions, documented in any format in the course of daily activities or business. Records creation, use, maintenance, storage and dissemination of information have been transformed by information and communication technology (ICT) applications, which provide the opportunity for governments everywhere to improve the delivery of information and services to citizens (Thurston, 2000). ICTs have revolutionized record keeping practices in public and private organizations worldwide. However, there is a fundamental tension in information technology, which makes it possible to process, manipulate, reformat, and change information easily. Electronic records are subject to loss because of their reliance on changing technologies, their storage on fragile media, and their dependence on documentation that may be inadequate or missing; hence, they must be properly managed at their early stage in the records' life cycle, thus posing real challenges for accountability, the rule of law, and the maintenance of organizational memory. This has resulted in lack of confidence on e-records. Accordingly, the US Government's document on Implementation of Government Paperwork Elimination Act (1998) noted that public confidence in the security of the government's electronic information processes is essential as agencies make the transition from paper records to electronic records environment. Against this backdrop, the Australian Government through the National Archives set up a standard (AS ISO 15489-2002) for a best practice approach to recordkeeping within the Commonwealth nations.

Citizens expect that their rights are as well protected and documented in an electronic environment as in a paper-based one. Until there is a well developed capacity to manage electronic records as legally verifiable evidence of entitlements, contractual obligations, policies, or transactions, mixed media (paper/electronic systems) will be essential (Thurston, 2000). The new technologies offer a vastly enhanced means of collecting records for and about citizens, communicating within government and agencies, parastatals and the public, and documenting the business of government and organizations. Before the advent of ICT (for creating and managing e-records), there was high cost of transaction (in terms of time, efforts and opportunities lost) to access timely and relevant information, which governments turning online can "potentially" reduce.

Many governments around the world have embraced the great potential of ICTs. Nonetheless, it appears that governments have not given adequate attention to the vital need to manage electronic records so that they meet evidentiary requirements, promote accountability, protect citizen's rights and support the rule of law. Moreover, poor ICT infrastructure will it difficult for complete transition to the electronic environment in developing countries. The needed infrastructure and capacity to manage electronically generated records in a constantly changing software and hardware environment have not been adequately developed. This chapter examines the characteristics of good record keeping practices, management of e-record, records management, challenges to records management in Africa, preservation of e-records, as well as suggestions for policy formulation and implementation of e-records management in Africa.

BACKGROUND

The Australian Standard (AS 4390) defined records as any form of recorded information, including data in computer systems, created

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