

CURRENT GOOD PRACTICES IN RECORDS AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE

INTRODUCTION

The keeping of records and storing of information in an organisation have, in the last few years, become critical not only for historical purposes but also, and more importantly, for current and future managerial and policy development. They have been used as tools and instruments with which to understand organisations and to use them as a basis for improvement, comparison with other agencies and secure resources.

Records management is a term used to refer to the way official records (correspondence, files, information) are organised in such a way that they have a meaning, and can be used continuously by the users such as managers, records professionals, educational institutions, legal authorities, the donor community and any other interested parties. Anne Thurston defines recorded information as “information which provides legal evidence. It can be verified, its context can be demonstrated and it can be shown that it has been protected from corruption”¹

Records management is increasingly becoming an important instrument which underpins the management of change process upon which modern management principles and practices depend. The public sector reforms, for example, that are taking place in many parts of the world depend on records and information that have been logically organised and stored, thus giving a meaning to the user. They are instrumental towards the interpretation of the past as well as forecasting and planning for the future.

Development in technology has also had an impact on the way in which records are kept and information stored. Many records in organisations are now computerised making it necessary for the users to be computer-literate in order to interpret the information accurately.

Records management has not only become an instrument for good management but has also developed into a recognised discipline and field of study, both in educational institutions as well as in government departments. It has, therefore, become an international instrument and message which can be given the same meaning and be shared between and among the users in different parts of the world. Within Commonwealth countries which have a common tradition in language, administration, law and education, the best practices of managing records can now

be shared as in a global village. Dissemination of information is therefore facilitated by the common traditional norms. The objectives of this publication:

- To share the best practices in records and information management in reforming the public services, as an instrument of the state.
- To design an improved records management system which can address deficiencies in the system which hinder successful implementation of the reform process.
- To demonstrate the development of a Retention Schedule where it is not available.
- To prepare for the introduction of the computerisation of personnel records.
- To show the example of a manual used by ministries and departments.
- To formulate guidelines for the use of the schedule and indexing.
- To make senior government officials aware of the utilisation of the system.

BACKGROUND

The recent developments in the political, economic and social fields have been underpinned by an organised system of managing records. They have also had an impact on the administration and management of government departments. The decline in the ideological confrontation and the consequential development and emphasis on the market economy as a dominant philosophy, the democratisation demands and process and the increase in the development of social movements for change have demonstrated that shared information has been effective in the development process.

In the political arena, there is evidence that the role of the state has been or is being redefined to meet the new demands by citizens for transparency and accountability. The movement towards greater democracy, culminating into open and just government, has depended on organised and well-managed information systems and records. The promotion of good governance and accountability would not have been that successful without available and accessible records and information which citizens can use as a base for their demands. Governments that have tried to suppress information have been frustrated by the spread of information in their countries from the international community. It is possible for citizens to see whether the government is transparent and accountable through the availability of

records which can be used as evidence in policy shifts. Well-managed records and information systems are therefore important instruments for guarding transparency through the formulation of standards of conduct for public officials. In some countries such as the UK, Parliamentary Standards Committees make information available and public for ease of interpreting inappropriate behaviour or deviations from the norms by public officials.

In the economic field, some governments have redefined the role of the state through, for example, concentrating on areas it can best manage and leaving other responsibilities to the private sector, public enterprises and non-government organisations. The state, in the demarcation of powers for example, would be responsible for creating a conducive environment for investment. In doing so, it must make information available about its governance, democracy, protection of citizens, rule of law and, above all, its management of resources and revenue. The tender procedures are clearly transparent only when there is access to the established criteria and recourse to appeal when there is evidence of wrong-doing.

Records management has become a critically important instrument not only in managing but also in reforming the public sector and the civil service machinery of government. For any reform to take place, there must be some current information about it which can be retrieved and modified. In some countries, difficulties have been experienced in obtaining accurate statistics about the size and cost of the civil service. Consequently, the number of ghost posts (posts which do not exist but for which payment is made by Treasury) could not be ascertained and exact expenditure unknown because there are no proper and accurate records and information systems in place.

In still other countries, some ministries and departments have duplicated their functions and responsibilities. One of the reasons for such duplication or overlap is that records are not properly stored and information is not shared by ministries so that they know what each of them is doing. Duplication is not only a waste of time and resources but also expensive in the sense that staff are paid for replicating the functions of other departments.

The seriousness of the problem has been identified as a result of increased budget deficit, recurrent expenditure and inability to collect the government debts. The reform of the public service has been slow in some countries either because of the absence of information or because records are not managed in such a way as to be easily retrieved for use. In some developing countries the donor community has recommended the use of computers where they do not exist as part of technical assistance. The computerisation of records has contributed greatly to the efficient use and storage of information within government departments. It has contributed immensely to the solutions of many administrative problems in that information on the latest developments in technology is disseminated quickly, thereby facilitating

communication between the users and consumers of development policy. In this context, it has assumed the role of problem-solving in the process of implementing government policy as well as delivering the services efficiently.

The main purpose, therefore, of maintaining good management of public service records is to facilitate the development of a new approach to and an understanding of the importance of all recorded information and to use it as a meaningful tool in reforming the service. It also aims to build bridges between the policy-makers and the consumers of services in improving their skills in understanding and using recorded information for the development process. In many developing countries, the public service is inadequately served in the area of modern information technology. The management of information systems has been so archaic in some respects that there has been an overwhelming reliance on files within filing systems, and inadequate physical storage space for files and papers. The lack of storage facilities tends to create nightmares for people who have to retrieve and use the information with accuracy and timeliness. One of the consequences of such a poor storage system is that the capacity to make good quality decisions is adversely affected.

In reviewing the performance of the entire public service machinery as part of the reform, it has always been necessary to review the objectives, functions, rules and regulations, procedures and practices. While the reviews aimed at improving productivity and better quality of service, they have brought about by introduction and adaptations, more modern techniques and approaches suitable to the particular needs of the organisation. The reviews stressed the importance of creating opportunities for innovations and management of change. They also led to a management ethos which places importance on experimentation, receptivity to new ideas and systems of management and flexibility to meet the new challenges of a rapidly changing environment. The overall outcome of these reviews was the development of organisational manuals, policies and procedures which would guide the newly-recruited staff towards the best practices and ways of doing things differently. These outcomes were also to be underpinned by recorded information which is properly stored and with a potential of being retrieved easily.

To the extent that records are available and retrievable, recorded information plays an important role in the re-organisation of the administration. Documentary evidence in developing countries shows that, where information has been recorded, the policy decisions have been made in time to meet the changing social environment as well as the global challenges. Information is therefore a source of power in influencing decisions and events in reforming the public service as a whole.

In instances where records and information have not been available and retrievable, it has been difficult to make policy decisions. Even if policy decisions were made,

the quality was poor and often had negative consequences, not only for the government but also for consumers, stakeholders and the donor community.

THE ROLE OF RECORDS AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM PROCESS

Records and information management systems play an important role in many stages of the development process and in management procedures. They are used as essential instruments in facilitating the efficient management of the public service reform which is taking place in most Commonwealth countries. The changes that are occurring in many parts of the world have a direct impact on Commonwealth countries, which are part and parcel of the global village. The spread of information and the sharing of best practices in the public service reform process are made possible by the use of modern technology, recorded information and the availability of properly managed records. The spread of such knowledge is further facilitated by common skills in managing records and information and by the potential adaptability of systems in countries that have a common tradition in management, law, language and culture. In addition, management culture is easily inherited, transferable and adaptable.

The success of the public service reform programme depends on many factors, the most important of which is the proper and organised method of managing the records and information systems. In most organisations, registries and records constitute the heart of the operational system. Some of the goals of the reform programme such as efficiency, budget deficit reduction, increased productivity, commercialisation of public enterprises and improving the skills base of the human resources are now making stringent demands for an accurate and well-organised information base. The management of information in one country would need to be uniform in the same way that organisational resources such as finance are managed. Improvements in Public Service Reform will, of necessity, require a review of the ways that information, statistics and data are collected and utilised. Records management plays an important role in the management of change and in institutionalising the corporate culture of an organisation.

A needs assessment study conducted in St. Kitts and Nevis and Grenada revealed that the records management systems had broken down. It was not possible, for example, to retrieve records from the Registry and Archives, the classification system of correspondence was inadequate and most people used their memories to recollect the whereabouts of certain documents. The system was so widespread that if the registry officer was away from the office, nobody could easily locate the file. The method of handling and accounting for mail, files received, actioned and dispatched left much to be desired.

The room in which both current and semi-current records were stored became the dumping ground for broken chairs, fans etc. with records thrown in any order. The retrieval of records became more and more difficult and depended on memory. In the archives there were inadequate storage facilities for public access and use of archives, an absence of a clear organisational mandate and legislation base and a deteriorating condition of the archives holdings.

The two governments have realised the important role played by organised and well-managed information and records systems in the public service reform process. The project was considered crucial by the governments because they believed that they could be rescued from deteriorating standards of records management. The records had been allowed to deteriorate to such an extent over a long period of time that only a complete review of the system could contribute significantly to the improvement of their records. The management did not place such importance on records management until they found that they could not retrieve information from an important document received a few months before. Further, the governments found it difficult to review policies because records could not be identified and used at the time they were needed. Outlined below are some of the functional and specific management areas in which records and information management systems have been effective and easily shared.

Policy formulation, implementation and evaluation

The formulation of any policy by government takes various forms and stages. It also depends on a number of factors which together complete the policy formulation process. The forms and stages are based on the records that are available and retrievable. In addition, various types of information need to be in place to assist in making decisions. Policy analysis, for example, would require that facts and figures be well-organised and managed in order for the managers to know the state of affairs before changes are made. In developing a policy, the challenge is for the decision-makers to find new approaches and alternative courses of action which leave room for further initiatives by the actors in the policy process. The availability of choices depends upon a vast research agenda, information and records. The relevant research and information on key issues of policy formulation enables governments to take appropriate course of action in problem solving process. This information needs to be processed in accordance with the needs of stakeholders.

The implementation of policy requires co-operation in information and communication activities between and among key actors in the policy-making process, thereby strengthening the capacity of managing the policy itself. The implementation of policy is also facilitated by information capacity-building, an exchange of a whole range of knowledge in order to improve co-operation between

partners in development. Effective communication depends on the way the information is managed and disseminated to those who implement policy so that they can constantly assess the efficiency of the implementation process.

Many countries have developed information and documentation centres which systematically collect information and experiences on policy implementation and make it available to users and interested organisations. Such centres have the capacity to contribute to regional related projects which aim to promote information availability and exchange on co-operation issues. In such projects, international or regional, co-operation is facilitated by the availability not only of information but also of new technologies in which collaborative efforts can be maximised.

Much of this information is in the form of reports, meetings, research studies, statistics and other raw data. Information is now communicated easily with the development of new technologies such as organising dialogue through the internet, and e-mail. Modern information tools and instruments accelerate the ease with which communication can be enhanced. These include information technology hardware, software, training and applications (databases, electronic mail, internet access etc.) and document search, storage, retrieval and delivery service.²

The evaluation of policy has become an important exercise in determining whether the objectives are being achieved. The evaluation of any programme contributes to the successful reassessment of the utilisation of human and financial resources. In general, an evaluation should seek to determine how far the objective has been realised from both quantitative and qualitative points of view. The evaluation process should be recorded through well-designed instruments that are stored and that can be replicated. For this reason, a running file of the programme is maintained for ease of follow up of the process. An evaluation of a policy process becomes an essential tool to assist in drawing out lessons of past experience which can inform future work. All these policy processes, practices and procedures rely heavily on well-organised and managed information and records which can easily be retrieved for further use. The effective use of records has become so important that it is necessary to train staff in the proper storage of information. The development of relevant training materials such as case studies, training modules and methodologies are of value to the profession as well as to the actors in the use of records and information.

Pillars of accountability, efficiency and effectiveness

The successful management of records and information in an organisation contributes to the maintenance of some of the democratic processes and principles. An efficient state, for example, that has to be accountable to its own citizens and stakeholders must of necessity depend on an efficient and effective instrument. For

the instrument to be effective, it must have records and information available for the users to assess for themselves the extent to which the state is being accountable to society. One of the pillars of accountability and transparency in a democratic state is the extent to which people have access to information to assist them in evaluating whether the government is transparent or not. In some countries, governments have legalised freedom of expression which is also related to freedom of information. Information only becomes a powerful instrument in governance when it is organised in such a way that it is retrievable, usable and a meaning can be drawn from it. Some autocratic governments would want to control the flow of information so that society had no access to any wrong-doing by the state. Indeed, it is a way of undermining democracy.

The efficiency and effectiveness of a policy depends on the availability and use of records so it is possible to see whether resources are used at minimum cost while achieving the goals of the state. Both efficiency and effectiveness can now be quantified through statistics, records and available information. Qualifiable products are much simpler to interpret than qualitative results in which there are elements of subjectivity.

The democratic process is often underpinned by the election process which also depends on accurate records and information being stored in a system from which it can be retrieved. The absence of names, ages and addresses of voters in a voters' roll can undermine the success of any election process, thereby nullifying the democratic process. This leaves room for suspicion and allegations of rigging the elections.

Collection of revenue and allocation of resources

The major revenue collection of government comes through various forms of taxation, such as income tax, sales tax etc. For the collection of revenue to be effective there must be information about people who pay tax, and it must be accurate and available. It must equally be stored in such a way that it can be used consistently or periodically with the hope of getting the same result.

Many countries have had difficulties in collecting taxes, mainly because the information on tax-payers is either inadequate or cannot be retrieved or replicated. If records are not in good order, inspection and evaluation of tax payments will be extremely difficult and will lead to a loss of revenue.

The collection of debt by government for services rendered is often made difficult because the records are not in order or the information is not computerised.

Tax avoidance or tax evasion, depending on which concept is illegal, has been exacerbated by the lack of effective management of information systems. When the taxable base is narrowed as a result of poor records keeping system, the income derived from taxation also is reduced, thereby affecting the allocation of resources by government. The reduction in revenue collection negatively affects the delivery of social services such as education, health, housing etc. Inadequate funding for major services will result in a decline in living standards, poor quality of life, low level of literacy, and homelessness. The pillars of social development, namely health, education and shelter will deteriorate leading not only to social unrest and political instability but also to an increase in poverty amidst few employment opportunities.

The allocation of financial resources to ministries by the Ministry of Finance and the management of the budget system is unlikely to be efficient in the absence of proper records and information systems being in place. Many officials are unaware of the importance of records and information until they are confronted with the absence of such information. Some governments have experienced budget deficits because of their inability to balance revenue and expenditure. In some cases, governments have been paying salaries and wages to civil servants who do not exist. Such posts, popularly known as ghost posts, are the result of poor records and information management.

Negotiations and arbitration in grievance matters

From time to time, government is in conflict with its own workers or other groups in society. The resolution of the conflict requires negotiations between the two conflicting parties. Staff associations always have to negotiate with government over salary increases and improvements in the conditions of service. The negotiating positions often taken by each side are based on available information and records. The associations, for example, often argue that their wages are below the inflation rate and compare themselves with employees in other sectors. The government, on the other hand, argues that it cannot afford the proposed wage increases on account of dwindling revenue collection and management of debt. Whatever the merits and demerits of the arguments, both sides rely heavily on their records, statistics and information being reliable and easily retrievable.

Many Third World countries have had to negotiate with the Bretton Woods Institutions, namely the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, over assistance in solving the balance of payments problems, debt crises, loans and grants. Because they do not always have accurate information about their own countries, they have often not fared well in the conduct of negotiations. The little and unreliable information available has often led them to negotiate from a position of weakness. They have ended up getting a poor deal. In many cases, they have

had to accept conditionalities for assistance because they have lacked alternative options based on accurate information. Consequently, Third World countries are very much disadvantaged in their attempts to negotiate with donors or partners in development and in the North/South debate.

In still other countries, information has been available, but the staff have had no skills in interpreting that information. This makes it necessary for managers to be computer-literate so that they can use the available information more accurately and for the good of the organisation.

One of the tactics often used in negotiations is to have information and knowledge about the parties involved in the conflict. Knowledge of the positions of the opposite camp in certain areas provides an advantage in knowing their weaknesses and points of strength.

Public Service reform and personnel records

Many countries have initiated reforms of the public service so that it can perform better and improve the delivery of services to the people. The reforms have demonstrated the need for accurate information and records so that details of those areas requiring change are known.

One of the most important instruments that underpins the reform process is the Personnel Records. “There are two categories of personnel records: statistical information which is concerned with overall members and personnel information about individual staff members. Data in both categories are often hard to locate, and are inaccurate and out of date in some countries. More commonly, what staff information exists is hidden away on personal files which are infrequently updated. There are often disparities between payroll data, staff and establishment lists kept centrally and personnel information within the organisations. Most of the time, this is probably due to ineffective communication systems, clerical inaccuracies and lack of interest in maintaining accurate records. Another reason could be that some managers prefer not to share detailed information about the staff in their organisation, especially when this exceeds establishment quotas.”³

Basic statistical information about staff in ministries is always required for a number of reasons. First, to make a quantitative assessment of training needs; second, for promotion, advancement and transfer; and thirdly, for the overall performance of staff. In some ministries, the number of established posts, filled posts, and temporary posts is not always readily available to make a decision on staff. The accurate information on age, sex, grade, department and category of staff is important when consideration is given for downsizing or right-sizing the public service.

Another type of information which is often not well documented and made available within ministries is the job description and job analysis. Job analysis is the process used to identify important elements of a job as its purpose, the main duties involved and its relationship with other jobs in the ministry. The initial product of job analysis is a job description. Other products include a job specification, person specification and training specification.⁴ In addition, job analysis has many uses including job evaluation and classification, organisational human resources planning, selection, recruitment and placement, induction and schemes of service, performance appraisal and health and safety. Such information is important in personnel management, human resources development and planning and budgeting.

In many developing countries, experience has shown that job descriptions often do not exist or are out of date, are too superficial or describe an idealised hope rather than a realistic job. Senior and top level staff such as Permanent Secretaries do not have job descriptions clearly written down. However, there is a general understanding of what the post-holder does although it is not well documented. Such information is always necessary in reviewing the performance of the Permanent Secretary of in restructuring the organisation.

In addition, job descriptions, objectives and functions of some ministries are either absent or not clearly laid down for people to see. The absence of clearly stated goals of some ministries becomes visible at the time the reviews are conducted or when determining the performance of the ministry. Some top officials in ministries had never seen their job descriptions or the objectives and plans of their ministries. If such staff do not have their job descriptions to what extent can they enforce performance appraisal of their staff (subordinates) when they themselves are not clear about theirs?

DOCUMENTATION

The efficiency and effectiveness of any government and the speed with which policies are formulated and managed depend upon a number factors of which documentation is one of the critical factors. Documents of all kinds; ordinance, rules, regulations, procedures, policy agency reports, audit reports, parliamentary reports, public accounts committee reports, to name but a few, provide an obvious source of information about ministries and their immediate environment. In reforming the public service, the critical information that is essential to understanding what the organisation is like, includes what plans, if any, it has for change, what its objectives are, how it has behaved in the past, how it is structured and supposed to function, the kind of procedures its staff are meant to follow and how it is staffed and financed.

In some countries, it is surprising to see that some top managers are not familiar with these basic tools of information which are necessary for an effective organisation. In still others, documentary evidence is hard to obtain, partly because no one can locate it and partly because people are sometimes reluctant to allow others to see it on the grounds that it is confidential or secret. Second, it can be time-consuming and difficult to digest because of the way it is organised and stored. It requires a lot of patience to identify the required information amidst the disorganised manner in which records are maintained.

The purpose of this publication is to develop the best practices in records and information management. Such records must be user-friendly, be conducive to innovation, must accelerate communication and above all reduce costs.

The publication is also an attempt to answer some of the questions raised and problems identified in managing the records systems. These problems are a result of a needs identification survey conducted by the authors in the countries of St. Kitts & Nevis, Grenada and the Gambia. While the problems and needs take different forms in each country, they have common features. The situation observed in these countries is very similar to other countries where such studies have not been conducted.

The following are some of the problems identified:

- In the Financial and Economic Ministries there was no retention schedule for financial vouchers and receipts, making it difficult to know what monies were paid in and out at any one time.
- When a file is bulky, it is either closed or a new one is opened without reference to the first volume.
- There is an absence of policy on which files should be kept or sent to the archives or destroyed. Consequently, all the files are piled up in one room making it inaccessible to the users.
- In some instances, temporary files are opened with a result that many staff have more temporary files which are not cross-referenced.
- In the absence of an efficient system, the records clerks make up their own filing/indexing system, making it difficult to correlate the information and even difficult to retrieve as the same information is in so many files. When files go missing there is a tendency to open new ones.
- There were in some cases, no system of control and flow of information between departments even in the same ministry.

- The physical deterioration of files, correspondence and other documents is a common problem faced by many countries.
- There was no organised and systematic way of sharing information between and among ministries and between Headquarters and provinces or regions.
- The staff responsible for records often occupy the lowest positions in the service, for example untrained secretaries and office orderlies. Such categories of staff are not very conscious of the importance of records management. Most of them have not been trained in records management. In libraries, there is often a large percentage of books that are lost mainly due to lack of proper system as well as a lack of importance attached to information.

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