

MANAGING SEMI-CURRENT RECORDS

When records are referred to infrequently in the course of daily operations they are said to have become semi-current and to have reached the intermediate phase of the records life cycle. Records generally are considered semi-current if they are referred to less than once per month per cubic foot of records (30cm). At this point, best records management practices would see us closing files according to established file closure criteria and procedures in preparation for removing them from their storage places in registries or office filing cabinets to a low-cost, warehouse-style repository or storage area, most commonly referred to as a record centre. Here, the records would be kept pending their final disposal, either by destruction or transfer to Archives, under approved records retention schedules.

Unfortunately, in many public service organisations, the orderly removal of semi-current records from records storage space in registries or offices is not taking place according to a well-defined system for managing the records life cycle. The resulting build up of semi-current records is responsible for bulging files and filing cabinets that become unwieldy to use, making the retrieval of relevant information more difficult. Eventually, if semi-current records are left to accumulate unchecked, they outgrow existing filing cabinets and office space.

As part of a Commonwealth Secretariat project to improve the records and information management systems of the Government of St. Kitts and Nevis, a series of Awareness Workshops were held for senior civil servants, including permanent secretaries, heads of departments and assistant secretaries. The workshops were meant to introduce the project, raise awareness about records management and the requirements of the civil service reform programme and to solicit support for the systems to be introduced and the resulting changes. During the workshops, participants identified the most pressing records management problems they currently faced. Lack of storage space for records was unanimously identified as a major area of concern.

At this point, the usual practice for public service organisations is either to purchase new filing cabinets and/or expand their registries or offices to accommodate the mounting cache of records or, if this is not possible, to rid themselves of the problem by destroying records. Neither solution is advisable. The purchase of new filing cabinets or the acquisition of additional registry or office space unnecessarily raises public service organisations' operating costs, while *ad hoc* destruction of records places them at risk of losing valuable records. The causal loop diagram below shows the relationship between the build up of semi-current records and such problems as the inability to retrieve information.

With proper management of the records life cycle wherein semi-current records are removed regularly from records storage space in registries and offices, many problems now responsible for inefficiency and ineffectiveness in public service organisations can be avoided. To facilitate regular removal of semi-current records, public service organisations should have in place criteria and procedures for file closure and transfer to a records centre into which semi-current records can be placed pending their final disposition, and a records retention scheduling system that guides the overall retention and disposal process.

Causal Loop diagram Closed File Retrieval Problems

