

Ensuring Optimal Use of Archives by Facilitating Effective Records Management Practices at Offices of Origin with Specific Reference to South Africa

PÉTRIA DE VAAL-SENEKAL, BA (HONS) CULTURAL HISTORY

De Vaal and De Vaal Information Brokers cc, 174 President Steyn Street, Louis Trichardt, Limpopo Province,
South Africa
e-mail: petria@devaalanddevaal.co.za

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ABSTRACT

This article is aimed to highlighting the challenges in records management, how they are addressing or could be addressed and this has an influence on the eventual usage of archives. Archives and records management per se are being discussed. The absences of certain aspects of records management can result in poor archival management. These is discussed and possible solutions / suggestions are given e.g. the establishment of records management programmes and the integration of records management / archiving. The article has been written based on the author's own experiences.

Key words: use, archives, records management, offices of origin, South Africa

Assicurare un utilizzo ottimale dell'archivio facilitando un'efficace pratica di gestione documentale agli enti produttori con speciale riferimento al Sud Africa

SINTESI

Il presente articolo ha lo scopo di porre in luce i cambiamenti nella gestione documentale, come ci si rivolge o ci si può rivolgere loro e se ciò influenzi un successivo uso degli archivi. Discutendo di archivi e gestione documentale in quanto tali se ne sottolineano le carenze, proponendo possibili soluzioni/suggerimenti, come ad esempio l'istituzione di programmi di gestione documentale e d'integrazione di gestione documentale ed archivistica. L'articolo è stato scritto in opposizione alle esperienze personali dell'autore.

Parole chiave: utilizzo, archivi, gestione documentale, ente produttore, Sud Africa

Zagotavljanje optimalne uporabe arhivskega gradiva na osnovi učinkovitega upravljanja z dokumentarnim gradivom pri ustvarjalcih s posebnim ozirom na Južno Afriko

IZVLEČEK

Članek predstavlja izzive pri upravljanju z dokumentarnim gradivom in njihove vpliva na morebitno uporabo arhivskega gradiva. Pomanjkanje ali odsotnost nekaterih vidikov upravljanja z dokumentarnim gradivom lahko povzroči neučinkovito upravljanje z arhivskim gradivom. Avtor predstavlja možne rešitve in predloge, kot npr. vzpostavitev programov za upravljanje z dokumentarnim gradivom in integracijo upravljanja/arhiviranja. Članek je napisan na osnovi avtorjevih lastnih izkušnjah.

Ključne besede: uporaba, arhivsko gradivo, upravljanje z dokumentarnim gradivom, ustvarjalci arhivskega gradiva, Južna Afrika

1 Introduction

Many organisations neglect the preservation of their own heritage in the form of the records they create. There is a lack of systematic records management programmes that care for records and documents they receive or create throughout their lifecycle. This often leads to poorly managed records and loss of organisational memory and therefore loss of a country's memory.

The records that are created today are the archival resources of the future. The author widely shares knowledge and experience in the public as well as in the private sectors of South Africa¹. The National Archives of South Africa mandates governmental records and the private sector is free to make use of its guidelines - therefore the references to publications by the National Archives of South Africa.

Since one of the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa's objectives is to preserve public records with enduring value for use by the public and the state, the National Archives and Records Service is not only concerned with the management and accessibility of records over a short period of time. Records created in electronic AND paper-based record keeping systems contain the memory of the decision-making of government and its impact. The National Archives and Records Service has a responsibility to ensure that this memory is maintained and protected for centuries to come. To facilitate this the National Archives and Records Service's role in terms of the **National Archives and Records Service of South Africa Act, 1996 as amended** is to promote efficient administration by regulating the records management practices of governmental bodies to ensure the sound management of the information resources. (*National Archives and Records Service of South Africa, 2006*)

Many challenges, however, face those in the roles of managers of records.

2 Archives versus records management

Records management is a process of ensuring the proper creation, maintenance, use and disposal of records to achieve efficient, transparent and accountable governance. In short, sound records management ensures that all the records that governmental bodies create in the conduct of their official business are, and remain, authoritative and authentic. (*National Archives and Records Service of South Africa, 2006*)

Both governmental and private institutions routinely create and accumulate records as they undertake their business. These records are created for a purpose and, as evidence of official business, they have on-going use as a means of management, accountability, operational continuity, legal evidence and disaster recovery. They also form the memory of the institution that created them, and by extension, they are part of society's memory and the broader cultural heritage.

Records must be managed by the organisation that originates them from the moment they are created. How records are created and what information they contain is as much a records management consideration as the maintenance of that information while it is being used and its ultimate disposal when it is no longer needed. (*Couture and Rousseau, no date*).

The archivist receives transfers from offices of origin according to its acquisition policy. An **institutional acquisition** is one made directly from the institution that produced the records. **Non-institutional acquisition** of archives involves material produced by a person or organisation outside of the institution making the acquisition. (*Couture and Rousseau, no date*).

An archive's acquisition policy instructs the originator in the sense of establishing its records management policies and procedures².

1. Examples are given in the article without mentioning institutional names. These are purely the experiences of the author and are meant to share with other professionals to learn from.

2. More about this in section 3.

3 The absence of proper records management practices

Records management is a major challenge in modern administration. More and more time is spent to address problems and to find solutions. (*Couture and Rousseau, no date*). Some of the challenges the records manager / archivist is dealing with, are, *inter alia* the following:

3.1 Proper classification systems (file plans)

Archives are influenced directly if there is a lack of a file plan (a plan by which documentation is arranged and stored to facilitate efficient retrieval and disposal). The file plan is used for both current paper-based and current electronic correspondence systems.

The way in which records are arranged and catalogued in an archive should be dictated by their **origin** and the administrative processes that created them is known as *respect des fonds*.

A *fonds d'archives* are those records produced or accumulated by an individual or institution in the course of its activities. These notions form the basis of all filing techniques, and the relations between them underlie archival practices throughout the world. (*Couture and Roussouw, no date*).

When an archive receives boxes and bundles of records without reference to any file plan, or: in certain instances old, outdated file plans and there is NO key available to understand the referencing methodology, the usage of the archives will be directly influenced.

There is a significant difference in those archives that received records from the originating office / institution that were filed and transferred according to a file plan and those who had NO or outdated file plans.

The file plan used widely in South Africa, is the **functional subject** file plan. This is a pre-determined logical, systematic and hierarchical structure based on an institution's functions that are then used to determine subject groups and subjects according to which records are filed and/or electronically indexed.

This file plan makes provision for the reference number, the description of the file and the disposal instructions. Where an "A" is indicated next to a file description, the records manager knows it has to go to the archives after the number of years indicated after the "A" lapsed.

Its purpose is to:

- facilitate efficient retrieval and disposal of records; and
- link the records back to the functions, activities and transactions that generated them.

3.2 Criteria for the value-allocation of records within the statutory and regulatory framework

Where there is a lack of values OR the skills to allocate these values, it results in records that are either kept permanently OR destroyed randomly. The golden rule of: you cannot keep everything and you cannot destroy everything, must be followed.

Primary values (those for direct purposes in the Records Management environment) include the following:

- administrative values
- fiscal values
- legal values

Secondary values (for indirect purposes and mainly in the archival environment) include the following:

- historical value
- evidential value

The statutory and regulatory framework that mandates record-keeping in South Africa, are, amongst others, the following:

- **The Constitution (1996, Section 195)** provides amongst others for the:
 - * effective, economical and efficient use of resources;
 - * provision of timely, accessible and accurate information; and requires that
 - * the public administration must be accountable
- **National Archives and Records Service of South Africa Act (Act. No. 43 of 1996 as amended)**

Section 13 of the Act contains specific provisions for efficient records management in governmental bodies. It provides for the National Archivist-

- * to determine which recordkeeping systems should be used by governmental bodies;
- * to authorize the disposal of public records or their transfer into archival custody; and
- * to determine the conditions -
 - ◇ according to which records may be microfilmed or electronically reproduced;
 - ◇ according to which electronic records systems should be managed.
- **The National Archives and Records Service of South Africa Regulations (R158 of 20 Nov. 2002)**

Part V: Management of Records contains the specific parameters within which the governmental bodies should operate regarding the management of their records.
- **The Public Finance Management Act (Act. No 1 of 1999)**
 - * The purpose of the Act is to regulate financial management in the public service and to prevent corruption, by ensuring that all governmental bodies manage their financial and other resources properly.
- **The Promotion of Access to Information Act (Act. No. 2 of 2000)**
 - * The purpose of the Act is to promote transparency, accountability and effective governance by empowering and educating the public
 - ◇ to understand and exercise their rights;
 - ◇ to understand the functions and operation of public bodies; and
 - ◇ to effectively scrutinize, and participate in, decision-making by public bodies that affects their rights.
- **The Promotion of Administrative Justice Act (Act. No. 3 of 2000)**
 - * The purpose of the Act is to ensure that administrative action is lawful, reasonable and fair and properly documented.
- **The Electronic Communications and Transactions Act (Act. No. 25 of 2002)**
 - * The purpose of this Act is to legalise electronic transactions and communications to pave the way for e-service delivery, e.g. authentic and reliable records/data messages should be created of electronic transactions and communications.
 - * According to this act, data messages are legally admissible records, provided that their authenticity and reliability as true evidence of a transaction can be proven beyond any doubt. The evidential weight of the electronic records (including e-mails) would depend on amongst others on the reliability of the manner in which the messages were managed by the originator and the receiver.
 - * Should bodies not have a properly enforced records management system and e-mail policy and a reliable and secure record keeping system, they run the risk that the evidential weight of their electronic records might be diminished. (National Archives and Records Service of South Africa, 2003).

3.3 Retention schedules and accompanying disposal instructions

The implementation of an effective disposal programme enables an office to dispose of its records regularly either by transferring the archival records to an archives repository or by disposing of the non-archival records when they are no longer required for administrative, legal or other functional purposes.

The minimum volume of records consistent with effective and efficient operations should be retained. Unnecessary and duplicated records should be eliminated to save storage costs as well as cost in terms of staff, time and equipment. Holding fewer records frees up both physical and computerised filing systems and makes valuable information easier to find.

In accordance with section 13(2)(a) of the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa Act, no public records under the control of any governmental body may be transferred to an archives repository, destroyed, erased or otherwise disposed of without a written disposal authority issued by National Archivist.

The destruction of records in terms of a disposal authority is carried out by the body/office concerned and must be done on a systematic and routine basis in the course of normal business activity. **Only ephemeral records may be destroyed.** Once records have been destroyed, a destruction certificate should be compiled. A copy of the certificate should be submitted to the National Archives and Records Service. The purpose of the certificate for the National Archives and Records Service is to monitor the implementation of a systematic disposal programme and to determine if any archival records were accidentally destroyed. If unauthorised destruction has occurred, the National Archives and Records Service will require a written explanation from the office concerned. The certificate has a secondary purpose in that client offices can use it to as part of their documentary evidence of the disposal process.

No destruction should take place without the assurance that the record is no longer required, that no work is outstanding and that no litigation or investigation or request which would involve the records in question in terms of the Promotion of Access to Information Act or Promotion of Administrative Justice Act is pending.

3.4 Records management policies and procedures

A Records Management Policy is one of the so-called “Public” policies. The question arises: does society need information? The answer is clear: no effective decisions, no development, no education, no creation without relevant information. A Records Management Policy should be a flexible policy. It should be formulated by a coordinating body rather than “one responsible”.

- A Records Management Policy attempts to shape a unified outlook for dealing with the acquisition, standardisation, classification, inventory, dissemination and use of information of every kind. Its point of view is holistic, evolving, forward-looking, and result-oriented.
- It recognises that information is always assuming new forms: oral, graphic, visual etc. and that it may be unstructured OR fixed. It should be flexible enough to respond to future or unforeseen needs.
- A Records Management Policy encourages the flow of information between directorates or units; the distribution of information among different levels of organisational hierarchy; the sharing of information to archive synchronised action.
- The establishment of a Records Management Policy discourages costly pitfalls of information mismanagement by laying guidelines for sharing and distributing information; resolving questions about proprietary rights; handling problems of security and disclosure; and balancing the optimisation of single unit performance against the needs of the organisation as a whole.

The risk of not having a Records Management Policy in place**Without a Records Management Policy**

Dangers	Results
Decentralised, uncoordinated information activities	Incomplete exploitation of information: lack of awareness of information resources
Information resources make an easy target for cuts under economic pressure	Resources that have potential survival value destroyed
Control of information by people untrained in its management	Information loss, failures to find when it's needed
Inappropriate information activities and products	Organisation's objectives not achieved: inadequate service to users: missed opportunities
Over-emphasis on technological answers without a strategy for determining the questions which the technology is intended to solve	Technology not operating to full potential: technology inappropriate to needs; bad use of human resources
Information scattered through the enterprise in different databases and different formats	It can't be brought together in an integrated form for profitable use when it's needed

With a Records Management Policy

Benefits	Results
Integration of all information activities	Information can make its full contribution to enterprise objectives
Decision-making on resources for activities can be objective, because it's based on the enterprise's objectives and priorities	Effective deployment of information resources; long-term planning becomes possible; continuity in development of information activities promoted. Information can be used for survival in bad times.
Cooperation among those responsible for managing information and records is promoted	Enrichment of information activities through inter-department and inter-discipline cooperation: reduction of unproductive time; discovery of new possibilities for information exploitation.
Sound decisions on technology investment	IT supports information objectives; permits developments in information and records use; allows better use of human resources; upgrading of skills; increased job satisfaction.
Constant monitoring makes possible rapid identification of environmental change and flexible response to it	Information activities continue to be appropriate to enterprise objectives; new situations can be evaluated, and new opportunities for information use seized.

3.5 Skills development / training

Often an institution lacks qualified and/or experienced staff members - specifically with reference to staff members managing records.

All staff must be introduced to a culture within an institution that acknowledges the importance of records. The Department will provide the necessary training and support to ensure as far as possible that all staff can comply with their obligations and responsibilities. Induction training for all new staff, whether permanent or temporary, should include awareness of records issues and practices.

Dedicated records management training/workshop sessions on respective levels need to be arranged and presented to equip staff members with specialised records management skills.

3.6 Guidelines as how to deal with the challenge of digital records

According to the *National Policy on the Digitisation of Heritage Resources (National Department of Arts and Culture, 2011)*, the fast evolution of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) poses a serious challenge to our existing practices of collective memory and heritage.

The impact of technology on official business and therefore on records management is not a new phenomenon. For example the introduction of the telegraph, typewriter and the telephone fundamentally altered the way business was done and records were kept.

The advent of the computer altered record keeping even more. Computerised systems offer significant advantages over conventional manual methods. In particular, they can manipulate large amounts of information and generate a wide range of information products. Computers offer speed, precision, diversity, flexibility and a rich and comprehensive documentation of process, and it is no wonder that they have been so quickly embraced around the world as a critical information management and communication tool.

However, the unique and fragile nature of electronic data demands a re-evaluation of the way governmental bodies manage records. Processes and procedures created to meet the needs of record keeping in the paper environment do not apply equally to electronic records. A reassessment of records management programmes is therefore required. In order to meet record keeping responsibilities, governmental bodies must ensure that electronic records are accessible and readable over time. An active programme committed to managing and preserving records from their creation to final disposal is a prerequisite of meeting these responsibilities. Any breakdown in the records management process increases the chance that electronic records that still have value to the body will become unreadable and inaccessible over time. (*National Archives and Records Service of South Africa, 2006*)

4 Some solutions

4.1 Establishment of records management programmes

A records management programme - usually in the form of a project, needs to include the following: Executive commitment; A co-coordinator who can drive the programme; A multi-disciplinary steering committee and other identified committees need to be appointed; The programme development must be systematic; Users must be consulted throughout the programme; The required resources should be in place; An implementation programme needs to be defined and developed as a result of the strategy document with specific goals, timelines and responsibilities; It should be ensured that all media and content types form part of the programme.

For an institution, to realise its Records Management objectives, it should have ready access to the information they require to deliver their services to the public in an accountable manner. Information is one of the key resources required to run an efficient organisation. Well-organised records will enable the institution to find the right information easily and comprehensively. The institution will be able to perform its functions successfully and efficiently and in an accountable manner. The consistent delivery of services will be ensured and the interests of the institution and the rights of employees, and present and future stakeholders will be protected.

The implementation of a records management programme, will put an institution in the position to turn around any current situation into streamlined Records Management practices. This, in its turn, will result in the effective disposition of records where the transfer to an archive plays an important role.

Training forms an essential part of improvement. Improvement with regard to all above challenges (absence of certain aspects of records management).

Records management is a shared responsibility between users, records managers and managers. All creators of records should be equipped with the necessary skills to capture and manage reliable and authentic records. Programmes for training should encompass all members of management, records and registry staff as well as all users creating and using records while performing their functions. (*National Archives of South Africa, 2003*)

4.2 The integration of records managers' and archivists' responsibilities

Too often records managers and archivists work on their "own islands". Time has come for archivists to be more involved and understanding towards the records manager's responsibilities. The records manager in his turn, needs to understand more about the archivist's responsibilities and the ultimate usage of the particular archives.

A loophole in archiving / records management is that the staff on the records management side don't know the characteristics of an archivist. They don't understand their responsibilities. They don't honour the possible secondary values of a record.

A professional records manager (and archivist) must be a combination of generalist / specialist. (*Penn et al, 1989*)

- The characteristics of the records manager/archivist can be, *inter alia*, the following³:
- General knowledge
- Friendly
- Strict
- Patient
- Going the extra mile
- Passionate about what you do
- Keep on looking for information
- Know specific info e.g. Legislation
- Trustworthy
- Inquisitive mind
- Ethical
- Attention to detail
- Efficient
- Organised
- Time-management
- Skilled / qualified
- Investigative skills / research skills
- Inter-personal skills / patience
- Communication skills
- Passion for history
- Knowledge of your subject
- Sense for the importance of heritage
- Can work in isolation
- Accuracy and attention to detail / thorough /neat & organised
- Background knowledge of archive
- Healthy person
- Knowledge of archival functions

3. This was an outcome from an archiving workshop - characteristics and requirements of the records manager / archivist.

- Logic & consistent (common sense)
- Allocate values
- Committed
- Innovative
- Do not mind getting hands dirty
- An ability to consider new ideas, new avenues, new possibilities.

5 Conclusion

In circumstances where resources are scarce and capacity is limited all too easy to favour one activity over another: to work diligently to monitor record-keeping in the present while neglecting the records of the past; or to conserve and protect historical records and turn away from the chaotic present.

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SUMMARY

Many organizations neglect the preservation of their own heritage in the form of the records they create. There is a lack of systematic records management programs that care for records and documents they receive or create throughout their lifecycle. This often leads to poorly managed records and loss of organizational memory and therefore loss of South Africa's memory. Based on case studies and personal experience of the author, the article briefly describes the current situation of records management in South Africa (public and private sector). The absence of *inter alia*:

- Proper classification systems (file plans) which ensure that archival records can be identified, preserved and retrieved from a very early age;
- Retention schedules and accompanying disposal instructions in order to guide the protection of archival records and their systematic transfer to archival premises where they can be preserved and used in accordance to policies and standards (Compliance: statutory and regulatory framework is included here)
- Records Management Policies and Procedures;
- Skills development / training;
- Guidelines as how to deal with the challenge of digital records.

Suggested solutions are: Establishment of records management programmes and The integration of records managers' and archivists' responsibilities. An effective records management program means records are protected through their lifecycle and appropriately transferred to archives or being destroyed. The characteristics of the records manager/archivist - as they were identified in an archival workshop facilitated by the author, are also listed.

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