How efficient and effective is the records management system used by the government of Swaziland?

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Abstract

An effective records management system allows tracking of the life-cycle of records in an organization and enables the organization to know when a record is created, its functions, duration of its usefulness by the agency that created it, the parameters and duration for maintaining it and the legal authority that enables it to be destroyed. The management and preservation of records in an organization help in achieving greater efficiency, effectiveness and economy.

Records management in the government ministries in Swaziland is undertaken within the framework of Swaziland National Archives Act no.5 in 1971. Its mission is to empower Swazi citizens to fully participate in their country's social, political and economic life through the equitable development, preservation and protection of the Swazi cultural heritage. Without proper records management systems, governments cannot be made to account of its decisions.

The aim of this paper was to investigate records management practices in government Ministries in the Kingdom of Swaziland. The study in particular sought to determine how records generated, used and disposed of in Swaziland government; the types of records that are generated within Swaziland Government; how the records are organized and retrieved; the training needs of Swaziland government registry staff; the attitude of staff towards records management practices; the level of staff awareness about sound records management practices; the suitability of records storage facilities and the challenges of e-records management in the government of Swaziland.

Mixed method research paradigms were used to carry out the study. The target population consisted of action officers; and records officers (registry staff) in government ministries in Swaziland. Ninety two action officers and 29 registry staff were involved in the study. From the action officers’ stratum, 31 staff were from top management, 31 from middle management, and 30 from lower level management.

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The results revealed that government ministries in Swaziland do not practice sound records management in line with the Swaziland National Archives Act (No. 5 of 1971). Besides, there is no uniformity in government with regard to filing methods and the manner in which records are destroyed or deleted. There are no control measures for ensuring care and safe custody of records. Electronic records management policy, filing procedure manual and disaster recovery plan do not exist. There is no policy or guidelines to ensure proper management of records. The lack of records management practices indirectly affects the information flow within the ministries. It is expected that the outcome of this study would inform policy on records management in government of Swaziland; facilitate effective records management in government; create awareness about sound records management; help inform records management training plan and help establish integrity and transparency in the functioning of government.

**Keywords:** Records management, Swaziland

**Introduction**

An effective records management program is a system that tracks the life cycle of each and every record. This means knowing when a record was created, what function it serves, how long it is considered useful by the agency that created it, what the parameters are for maintaining it and for how long, and what legal authority enables it eventually to be destroyed and when, if at all (R.M Manual, 2003). The managing and preservation of records help in achieving greater efficiency, effectiveness and economy.

In government institutions all over the world, preservation of records is regarded as an activity that is the exclusive responsibility of the conservational unit of an archival institution. The challenge remains ensuring continued access to such records over a long period of time. Cameron (2001) argues that the most cost–effective and efficient way of securing records for future (archives) is to ensure that they are captured on as durable materials as possible.

Eden and Feather (as cited in Akussah, 2002) concluded after a survey of preservation policies and strategies in British Archives and Record offices that preservation is a cord that runs through all the activities of an archive or record office. The perception held commonly that preservation belongs to the domain of the conservator in the archival institutions and not for the records manager in the registry, or records centre. In this regard, Lusenet and Drench (2002), argued that such a perception does not give the records of today the chance to graduate into the archives and for that matter heritage of tomorrow. The purpose of records management system is to ensure that records are created, used, maintained, and disposed of in an orderly and controlled manner. According to Sebina (2001), without proper records management, organizations in general are likely to face problems of paper proliferation in their offices and experience retrieval difficulties. Chirwa (1993) explained that records held by various government departments are created in the course of various official functions allocated to various government departments. However, without a proper records management policy to streamline the creation of such records, it is not easy to understand the procedures followed in their creation, utilization and maintenance of the records. Government ministries create records to
fulfill their operational needs and attain the desired goals, but they do not seem to plan what quantity and quality of records they would like to see created.

The Structure of Government of Swaziland

In Swaziland, there are 17 government ministries that include among others:

- Ministry of Justice
- Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare
- Ministry of Public Service & Information
- Ministry of Tourism
- Ministry of Works & Transport
- Ministry of Sports & Culture
- Ministry Natural Resources.

Some of the Ministries have decentralized their activities by establishing regional branches while others are yet to do so. Each ministry has several departments and registries which are managed by personnel some of whom are not trained in records management (Lukhele, 2008).

Figure 1 presents selected the government ministries in Swaziland.

**Swaziland Government Ministries**

Records management in the government ministries in Swaziland is undertaken within the framework of the Swaziland National Archives Act. Swaziland National Archives was established by Archives Act no.5 in 1971. Its mission is to enable Swazi citizens to fully participate in their country's social, political and economic life through the equitable development, preservation and protection of Swazi cultural heritage.
Besides, the Swaziland National Archives has a mandate for records management in government and public sector organizations. This mandate includes:

- Managing public records and ensuring their preservation as historical records.
- Advising public offices on proper records management practices.

Government ministries in Swaziland receive advisory services on the storage and preservation of their archival materials from Swaziland National Archives as stipulated by the Act. The Act empowers the director of Swaziland National Archives to examine and advice on the care, preservation, custody and control of any public records. The Act further empowers the director at his or her discretion, to approve any institution, whether private or otherwise, as a place wherein may be deposited, housed or preserved, either permanently or temporarily, any public archives or records that have been declared public records.

**Statement of the problem**

There has been many an instance when a person (government employee, researcher, journalist, student, etc.) in search of a particular document known or perceived to be in the custody of one of the government’s agencies found that document impossible to find (Times of Swaziland, 2003). According to Dlamini (2008), “Information that is known to exist becomes hard to retrieve.” Often this translates to time wasting on the part of the document seeker and a general low regard for registry personnel in terms of their custodial qualifications.

Without proper records management systems, governments cannot be held accountable for their decisions. Corruption cannot be easily detected or questioned and service delivery is hampered. Sound records management systems enhance transparency, accountability and integrity in government. Without such a system in place, it is difficult if not impossible to hold a government accountable. Public records are key to accountability and good governance because they reflect the government’s functions, activities and procedures and the administrative processes that generate them, as well as the facts, acts, and transactions affiliated to them. Records can effectively play the above role if they are appropriately managed and made accessible when required (Ngulube, 2003). According to Wamukoya and Mutula (2005), poor records management is bound to result in information gaps that, lead to incomplete public records and the loss of documentary heritage.

**Aim and objectives of the study**

The main objective of this study was to investigate records management practices in government ministries in the Kingdom of Swaziland in order to come with a framework that enhances their effective and efficient management. The specific objectives of the study were to:

(a) Determine how records are generated, used and disposed of
(b) Assess the types of records generated within government ministries in Swaziland
(c) Find out how records are organized and retrieved
(d) Examine the training needs of the government’s records management staff
(e) Establish the level of awareness of sound records management practices.
(f) Assess the suitability of the records storage facilities used
(g) Explain the challenges of records management within government in Swaziland

Methodology
A survey of the of 15 government ministries was carried out. A questionnaire and follow up observation was designed for the purpose of collecting relevant data from ministries. The government ministries were selected purposively based on their economic impact to the nation, size of the ministry and amount records generated and managed. Ministries that had many departments and staff and were also generating and managing large amounts of records were selected for study. The ministries that were selected for study are reflected in Table 1.

Population of study
The target population consisted of action and records officers in government ministries in Swaziland.

Sampling procedure
The study adopted the Israel Model to determine the sample size (Israel, 1992). Using the formula presented by this model the following sample sizes were calculated:

\[
n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}
\]

Where \( n \) = desired sample size
\( N \) = Population size
\( E \) = Margin of error
\( e = \pm 10\% \)
90% Confidence Level

a) Sampling of government ministries

\[
n = \frac{17}{1 + 17(0.10)^2}
\]

\( n \) = 17
14.5 Ministries
= 15 government ministries

b) Sampling of registry staff

\[
n = \frac{40}{1 + 40(0.10)^2}
\]

\( n \) = 40
29 registry staff
c) Sampling of action officers

\[ n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2} \]

\[ n = \frac{1185}{1 + 1185(0.10)^2} = 92 \text{ action officers} \]

The action officers and registry staff were randomly selected based on their operational level positions in the ministries’ organizational structures; 92 action officers and 29 registry staff represented the target population. The distribution of the action officers was as follows: 31 staff were drawn from top management, 31 from middle management, and 30 from lower level management. Besides 29 staff members were drawn from the registries as already depicted above. This distribution ensured that the sample covered all the management levels at ministries.

**Data collection procedure**

Two set of questionnaires were used to collect data complemented by observation. The first questionnaire was distributed to the action officers. This questionnaire was intended to enable the researcher to understand the functions of the various departments of the government ministries; the nature of the records each department creates, receives and uses; the frequency use of the records; the type of information that is shared across the department; and lastly, users’ perception of the services rendered by the registries and secretaries.

The second questionnaire was distributed to the registry staff. The researcher intended to understand the types of records kept; procedures for opening and closing files; file titling; storage, retrieval and disposition procedures and other matters affecting the operations of the registries. The administration of the questionnaires was followed by physical observation of records units and registries in the ministries.

**Validity & reliability of instruments**

To ensure validity and reliability of instruments, questions were piloted to a small group of consultants at the Institute of Development Management (n=5) before being administered to the main sample. This was to provide the opportunity to check out whether any of the questions were ambiguous and interpreted differently by different respondents.

**Data analysis**

After the collection of the data, the researcher developed a coding sheet for representing variables with figures, for example officers, registry =1 and action =2. Responses to the open-ended questions were scanned to determine the words and phrases used by the respondents. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 12.0 for Windows was used to present and analyze the data. Tables, pie charts, percentages and graphs were used to present the responses of the respondents. Significance within the variables was noted and then evaluated via cross tabulation in order to assess any correlation between the variables.
Table 1: Government ministries and staff included in the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ministry</th>
<th>Records Staff</th>
<th>Action officers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Commerce &amp; Trade</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Education &amp; Training</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Foreign Affairs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Health &amp; Social Welfare</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Housing and Urban Development</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Labour &amp; Social Security</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Public Service &amp; Information</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Sports, Culture and Youth Affairs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Agriculture</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Economic Planning</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Justice &amp; Constitutional Affairs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Natural Resource &amp; Energy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Information &amp; Communication</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Finance</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Public Service</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(N=29) (N=92)

Findings
The responses obtained from questionnaires and information recorded through observation were analyzed and presented under the following broad subheadings:
**Types of records created by the ministries**

The survey sought to reveal the types of records created by the action officers and registry staff in the process of carrying out their functions. Both action officers and registry staff were asked this question in order to identify the nature of the records created. Most of the respondents 93 (78%) focus was on policies, manual and personnel records, although 30 (25%) work with financial records. The creation of records in the ministries didn’t appear to follow any conventions, such as standardized formats and referencing. An organization with a proper records management programme would implement, as part of program correspondence management, forms management, report management, directive management and copies management in order to ensure standardized formats in the creation of records. Some of the records created by the action officers did not have reference numbers. Some of the files did not even have file titles. Those that had file titles had broad ones that led to all related issues being filed in them. It should be noted that files are not documented.

**Places of storage of records**

Action officers were asked where they kept the records that were created. The results show that 73 (81.1%) were keeping records in their offices, 47 (52.2%) were keeping records in registries, and 22 (24.4%) were keeping records in the storeroom.

The findings also revealed that most of the action officers preferred to keep their records in their office cabinets. Perhaps this is because they found it much easier and faster to get access to them in their offices. The action officers frequently transferred records to the registries when they no longer used them, effectively using the registry as a storeroom when in fact a registry is “the place where files and other records are processed, kept and retrieved. It is the control centre of all information coming into and leaving the organization. It provides information when it is needed, where it is needed, at the time it is needed and to people who need it” (Registry Handbook, 1993).

The responses also revealed that there is a lot of duplication of records in these offices. The appraisal of records was found to be a particularly problematic area. No procedures were in place to assist in the appraisal of records. Officers removed records from their offices when there was no space available to store them. The storerooms are more of a dumping ground for records. No procedures were followed when records were deposited into the storerooms. It was observed that in the storerooms, records were competing for space with other materials such as old computers, chairs, vacuum cleaning machines, fan and heaters. Files in these storerooms were neither well arranged nor documented, which a problem is when action officers want to retrieve records. Most of the time records in the storerooms were forgotten and remembered only when there was a need to extract information from them.

The research also sought to check whether action officers were using the registries to keep their records. The findings showed that about 82 (69%) of the action officers were not using the registries for keeping records. The reasons given by the registry staff was that most of the action officers kept their current records in their offices and only transferred records which they were not using to the registries. The action
officers noted that they were not using the registries because files got lost in the registries; consequently, it was safer to keep current records in offices and take those that they did not need to the registries.

**Information sharing challenges within ministries**

The survey sought to find out if there were some challenges in sharing information within the Ministries. The results of the study revealed that 75 (63.3%) were having problems in sharing information within the Ministries because not all of them were using the same classification system in classifying their records and others were not using the classification scheme at all. As a result documents could not be retrieved easily. Besides, there was a lot of duplication of records in different offices.

Upon observation, it would seem that though central registries existed in these ministries, they were not used properly by action officers. Sharing information was a problem because there was no proper documentation of the files in the offices in addition 11 (9%) of respondents revealed that sometimes decisions could not be taken because of missing files.

**Classification scheme**

Respondents were asked if their records were arranged according to a classification scheme. The survey revealed that only 56 (47%) were using their ministries classification scheme. Furthermore, those who were not using the classification scheme kept their records in their offices, where they claimed to remember each and every file, but they did not know how to use the classification scheme. These created problems of accessing information contained in records especially, when action officers were away and had to deal with records upon their return. The records were transferred to the registries when they were not frequently used leaving the registry staff to classify those documents. Action officers mentioned that they were never trained on how to use the classification scheme, and those who were using it, were not using it properly.

Lack of knowledge of the existing classification scheme and the inability to use it also resulted in the improper referencing of mail. The survey’s findings showed that only 48 (40%) of action officers referenced their correspondence. Procedures that act as a benchmark for the maintenance and use of files were non-existent. Incoming mail that was processed and ready for action was attached to the respective files prior to submission to the action officers. Replies to these in many instances never found their way into files, meaning that files had an incomplete account of what transpired. Information that was known to exist was not easily retrievable.

**Electronic records**

The officers were asked whether they generate electronic records in the process of carrying out their functions. It was revealed that 76 (84.4%) action officers generated records in an electronic format. They were then questioned about the existence of a policy governing storage and retention of e-mails. Most of the respondents indicated that a policy governing e-mail storage and retention did not exist (45%) or they were not aware whether it existed 36 (40%). Only 14 (15%) of the respondents were aware
of the existence of an email policy. Therefore only 15 % of the respondents possibly managed their e-mails according to the ministries’ policies. The Ministry of Education is the only ministry with a database to maintain its records. Most of the respondents 39(43.3 %) maintained their electronic records on a memory stick, 7(7.8 %) on a hard drive, and 14(15.6 %) said that they did not create electronic records.

Semi- current records
The survey also sought to elicit how closed files were handled in the registries prior to their transfer to the archives. 18 (62%) of the registry staff stored their closed files on the floor and in the cupboard, while 11(38%) stored their closed files in store- rooms. The findings also revealed a shortage of registry space to keep non-current records and cupboards prior to archiving. Appraisal of records was a problem as no procedures were followed to assist. The researcher also checked the condition of the records in the registries and found that most damage to the records was caused by mishandling and the intensive use of documents. Other factors that caused damage in these registry documents were insects and bad paper. This explained the deterioration of documents that ended up in Swaziland National Archives.

Disposal procedure
The respondents were asked what legal requirements governed when records should be destroyed, and what records should be permanently preserved. It was found that although there was a legal basis for records’ destruction, most of the registry staff were not aware of them 20(70 %). Such legal requirements include the stipulation in Act no. 5 and the retention schedule. Yet even those who were aware of this legal requirement did not apply it.

The researcher observed that registries stored closed files on top of the cabinets, and these were to be destroyed or sent to archives. Most of these records needed to be audited An example was the Ministry of Education’s scholarship records regarding students who had finished school ten years prior and financial statements that needed to be audited. The study also investigated how often records were transferred to the archives. 8(28%) respondents transferred records after 3 years and 21(72%) transferred records after 5 years.

Further follow up through observations revealed that records that took long a time to be transferred to archives were records like financial statements, payment vouchers and scholarships records. With respect to the frequency of transfer of records to National Archives, 8(28%) of the respondents said records were transferred after 3 years while another 21(72%) said records were transferred after every 5 years.

Training
Records management is a specialized field that can only be handled by experienced professionals. The respondents appointed to the position of records management officers were not fully trained records managers. They were therefore not prepared to professionally handle the records management dilemma faced by the ministries. Most
of the registry officers had an O’level certificate, but none had formal training or even diploma level in records management.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

It is evident that an effective records management program should guide the management of records throughout their lifecycle. This means knowing when a record is created, what function it serves, how long it is considered useful by the ministries that created it, what the parameters are for maintaining it and for how long, and what legal authority monitors its lifecycle (R.M. Manual, 2003). The ministries’ strategies are not following the lifecycle approach, causing havoc in the management of records.

The following recommendations were proffered to help mitigate the problems identified:

The Swaziland National Archives should consider developing and implementing good records management policies and set up standards and guidelines to be adhered to by government Ministries. The Swaziland National Archives should strive to ensure compliance with the relevant provision of the Act as well as the ISO standards on records management. Records management is a specialized field which can only be handled by experienced professionals. Therefore it is recommended that ministries should train the records management officers at least to a diploma level or recruit well trained records personnel into public institutions, as they will have a better appreciation of preservation issues.

Further research should be extended to parastatal organizations in Swaziland to ensure that management of records, both in government and the cognate public sector, is harmonized to enhance service delivery, accountability and transparency in the management of the country’s public affairs.

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