Dilemma in Disposing Electronic Mail Records in Public Departments: The Zimbabwean Scenario

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ABSTRACT

This study tackles the disposition of electronic mail (e-mail) records in public departments in Zimbabwe. The study established that there were no clearly laidout guidelines on e-mail records management in Zimbabwe and this has resulted in public officers using their own discretion in disposing such records. This study used a survey research design and collected data using questionnaires and observation. Twenty-two public records officers were selected for the study using simple random sampling. The study recommends e-mail records management skills development and the crafting and adoption of an e-mail legislative, policy and procedural framework by the National Archives of Zimbabwe for use by public departments.

Key words: Disposition of e-mail records, Email, E-mail management, E-records management, National Archives of Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

The dawn of electronic mail (e-mail) has come as a great relief to communication today. Now, people can easily communicate with friends and peers who are a thousand kilometres away, instantaneously and at reasonable cost. Nonetheless, the use of email has been adopted by the business world in both public and private sectors, posing numerous e-mail management challenges. One of these challenges, which is the object of this paper, is disposition of official e-mail records. According to the records lifecycle, records are created, used, maintained and disposed (Shepherd and Yeo: 2003). It has been generally easy to manage paper records through this lifecycle, but it has been a mammoth task to do the same with electronic records. Questions arise and remain unanswered whether to preserve or destroy e-mail records, whether or not to appraise e-mail records before disposition, whether to preserve e-mail records on the computer system or print to paper or save them on external storage devices and whether to keep e-mail print-outs and external storage devices in storerooms or transfer them to records centers. Since email management is a wide field, this study is only restricted to disposition of official email records in public departments in Zimbabwe.

E-mail has become the de facto standard for business communication in both public and private organisations. Like other records, e-mail records enhance good governance, accountability, transparency and informed decision-making. Unfortunately, scholars like Nengomasha and Beukes-Amiss (2002), Keakopa (2007), Mutsagondo (2017), Mutsagondo and Ngulube (2017) and Nengomasha (2009) hold that e-mail records are poorly disposed in many public organisations, leaving such organisations without records of administrative, informational and evidential value. This places information practitioners between a rock and a hard place and on the horns of a dilemma as they juggle between options as to how they should professionally dispose official e-mail records, thus making it imperative to carry out this study which is based on government ministries in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe.

Examine the current scenario regarding disposition of e-mail records in public departments in Zimbabwe. Outline e-mail records disposition dilemmas that public sector records practitioners face in Zimbabwe. Assess the root causes of the dilemmas. Make recommendations on how to improve disposition of official e-mail records.

The study of e-mail management is justified for two reasons. Firstly, as noted by Nengomasha (2009), e-mail management warrants special focus due to its widespread and substantive use within organisations. The National Archives and Records Service of South Africa (NARSSA) (2006) also claims that the use of e-mail as a means of communication is increasing on a daily basis, thus making it pertinent to focus energy, time and resources on such an area. Secondly, it has been established by some scholars like Keakopa (2007), Nengomasha (2004) and Nengomasha and Beukes-Amiss (2002) that many countries do not have clear guidelines on how to deal with the management of e-mail records, despite its use in day to day administration of many organizations. Such an unfortunate position provided the urge that compelled present study researchers to investigate the disposition of official e-mail records in order to contribute significant knowledge to the email management discourse.

Although the general context of email records management is addressed, the study is restricted only to the disposal of email records. This includes destruction of transitory e-mail records and the transfer of valuable e-mail records to secondary storage, for example, storerooms or records centres. The study was also delimited to government ministries in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe. This excluded other public departments, namely statutory bodies and local authorities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many conceptual frameworks that can be used in managing records in general and electronic records in

particular as well as in informing related studies. Some of them are the records lifecycle concept, records continuum concept, Victorian Electronic Records Strategy and the International Council on Archives principles and functional requirements concept. This study used the records continuum concept to inform and direct the study.

For one to fully comprehend the dictates of the continuum concept, there is need to firstly look at the records lifecycle concept. Developed in the 1930s, the records lifecycle concept is attributed to Schellenberg of the United States' National Archives (Shepherd and Yeo: 2003). According to Coetzer (2012) the lifecycle concept is an analogy of the life of a biological organism which is born, lives and dies, just as records are created, used, maintained and disposed. The gist behind the concept is that records should be managed in accordance with the stages as outlined. Scholars like Yusof and Chell (2000) hold that the lifecycle concept is an inappropriate model for the management of electronic records, thus relegating the study to the conceptual framework of the records continuum concept.

In the 1990s, there arose the records continuum concept. The concept which was developed in Canada and adopted in Australia is attributed to Upward (Bantin: 2002). Chaterera (2013), citing Kemoni (2008) holds that the concept is applicable to both paper and electronic records. The records continuum concept holds that there should be consistent and coherent management of records from the time they are created through to their preservation and use as archives (Coetzer, 2012). Proponents of the concept argue that there are no boundaries in the way records are managed and thus they see no distinction between the duties of a records manager and an archivist (Bantin: 2002). This study upheld the dictates of the records continuum concept where it paid heed to the fact that a record at the point of creation can automatically be an archive. Thus, the disposition of e-mail records is a matter of concern as some email records are archives in their own right and thus deserve to be managed accordingly.

According to the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa (Narssa, 2006) e-mail refers to mail sent or received electronically. E-mail is divided into official and non-official mail. Official e-mail is non-personal and involves correspondence to do with the tactical and strategic administration of an organization.

Narssa (2006) gives the following examples of official e-mails, that is, policies and directives, correspondences, work schedules, agendas, minutes and reports while non-official e-mail includes personal messages, junk mail and announcements of social events. According to Maine State Government Records Management Services (2003), non-official e-mail records can be deleted willy-nilly since they are transitory and have nothing to do with the strategic administration of an organization.

E-mail has risen to prominence due to a number of reasons. It is relatively cheap, fast, easy to use, reliable and secure and allows one to attach large volumes of data, without additional cost (Medina, 2013). Thus, the head office of a multinational corporation in the United States can send circulars, minutes of meetings and policies to branches in Africa and Asia at reasonable cost and just at the click of a button.

E-mail has its fair share of challenges. Among them are information overload, computer viruses, e-mail fatigue and security threats (Medina, 2013). E-mail fatigue refers to a situation where a user does not frequently check his or her mail box and suddenly finds that there is a large number of e- mail which is difficult to cope with. Information overload, which also contributes to e-mail fatigue, is largely caused by the use of mail lists as well as unsolicited mail. Another challenge, that is, computer viruses, can damage the computer system. Nengomasha (2009) adds the following challenges; limited storage capacity, slowness of the system, poor Internet and power access and poor management as other challenges.

The University of Texas (1997) cited by Nengomasha (2009) holds that four approaches can be used to manage official email. These approaches are printing to paper, managing e-mail records within the email management system, integrating e-mail messages into a document management system and creating folders that are stored outside the mailbox. Disposition of e-mail records depends upon the approach that an organisation selects to use. These are outlined below.

Firstly, many organizations dispose e-mail records by printing to paper and manage paper records the same way they do with born-paper records (Virginia, 2009; Wallace, 2001). They further hold that this is the commonest approach used in many developing countries. Paper print-outs are given the same treatment as paper records as regards appraisal, preservation, retention, destruction and transfer. Medina (2013) supports use of this approach as he argues that e-mail records can also be managed as business records in the manner existing paper records are managed.

Secondly, e-mail records can be managed and disposed within an e-mail management system. In this approach, there are three types of folders namely a personal folder, public folder and a shared folder (Narssa, 2006). While personal folders are used for non-official mail, public folders are used for official mail and as well, shared folders are set aside for specific units or projects within the organization.

Thirdly, as advanced by Narssa (2006), e-mail can also be managed and disposed within a document management system, for example, the Integrated Documents and Records Management System. The system contains an electronic corporate file plan, according to which email records are filed. Commonwealth of Virginia (2009) adds that a document management system like Enterprise Content Management's IBM File Net can also be used. The approach has the advantage that it protects the authenticity of e-mail in the same way as it protects the authenticity of all other records.

Lastly, e-mail records can be managed and disposed within folders that are created outside the mail box (Commonwealth of Virginia, 2009). Designated folders are created and different e-mail messages are assigned to the appropriate folders. This approach has the advantage that it uses existing technology, but because it is not a records management tool, it has no global search capabilities.

Disposition refers to the act of either destroying or transferring records into archival custody (Narssa: 2006). Destruction is whereby ephemeral records are deleted in the case of e-records and burnt or shredded in the case of paper records. According to Commonwealth of Virginia (2009), transfer of e-mail records takes two forms. Firstly, transfer of e-mail records can be from one system or medium to another, with due respect to their authenticity, integrity and usability, a process referred to as migration. Secondly transfer takes the form of transferring e-mail messages onto external storage devices like optical disks, floppy disks and magnetic tapes which are in turn taken to storerooms or records centers for secondary storage.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study made use of the survey research design. According to Babbie (2011), a survey research design allows the researcher to collect a lot of information since it interrogates opinions, attitudes or experiences of people. Forty-five Records and Information Officers from 45 government ministries and departments in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe made up the population of the study. From the population, 22 officers were selected for the study using simple random sampling, making a sample size of 49%. It was the researchers' contention that a sample size of around 50% would bring about valid and reliable results as well as bring about data saturation. The officers completed a semi structured questionnaire. In order to triangulate collected data and findings, data were also collected using personal observation. Data were analyzed thematically.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings of the Study

Findings of the study were outlined in line with the objectives of the study. All 22 respondents expressed that their departments created and received email records. However, 15 of them expressed that the rate of creation and receipt of e-mail records in their departments was so low that at times only eight to ten records were created or received in a month. Ten respondents claimed that the commonest types of e-mail records in their departments were official correspondences, five stated that they were minutes, four stated that they were policies and three stated that they were circulars.

There were no restrictions as to who created e-mail records. Many officers, for example, administration officers, human resources officers, executive assistants, information technology officers and heads of departments or ministries created e-mail records and sent them on their own. The situation was different with receipt of official e-mail records. In 12 departments, receiving official e-mail records was the responsibility of records officers, while in seven departments, they were received by information technology officers and in the last three departments, heads of ministries or departments were responsible for receiving e-mail records. Only such officers had the password to the organization's e-mail address. This ensured security of the organizations' records. Dilemma in Destroying, Saving and Transferring E-mail Records

Respondents expressed that they faced difficulties on what to do with e-mail messages they received. Fifteen (68%) informants claimed that they were often tempted to destroy such messages soon after reading them or after relaying the messages to their intended recipients. Seven (32%) respondents claimed that they saved the messages right away. The dilemma was extended to whether to transfer e-mail records or not. The table below shows difficulties respondents faced in destroying and transferring e-mail records.

Table 1

Difficulties Informants Faced in Destroying and Transferring E-mail Records

Action	Faced difficulties	Did not face difficulties	Total
Destroying	15	7	22
Transferring	18	4	22

Table 1 shows that more informants had difficulties transferring e-mail records than in destroying them. Transfer of e-mail records entail printing soft copy e-mail records onto paper or saving them on flash disks and send them to secondary storage. It was rather more difficult for public officers to transfer e-mail records because there were no guidelines for transfer from their ministries as well as from the National Archives of Zimbabwe, a public body which oversees the management of public records in the country. It was noted that despite the absence of disposal guidelines, destruction seemed relatively easier, though an ad hoc approach was used in destroying e-mail records as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Informants' Options in Destroying E-mail Records

Option	Frequency	%
Destroy paper printouts	16	73
Delete messages from the Inbox	6	27
Delete e-mails from the E-Mail Management System	0	0
Delete messages from the Document Management System	0	0
Delete messages from folders created outside the Inbox	0	0
Total	**22**	**100**

Table 2 shows that public departments in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe had two options when it came to destroying e-mail records. The first one involved printing e-mail messages and later destroying the paper print-outs in the same way paper records are destroyed and following recommendations made in the retention/ disposal schedules. Personal observation revealed that indeed there were hordes of e-mail print-outs in all the 22 departments. The second option involved deleting e-mail messages directly from the e-mail Inbox. Respondents were not aware of any other options like managing e-mails in the e-mail management system or in the document management system, which are in use in some developed economies. The fact that 27% of respondents were used to destroying e-mail records straight from the Inbox meant that a number of organizations were losing important records, a situation that was likely to destabilize the administration of the public service in future.

The situation was made worse by the revelation that 16 (73%) respondents claimed they always destroyed e-mail

messages, while only six (27%) saved such messages regardless of their importance. Twelve (55%) respondents revealed that the action to destroy was mostly guided by space challenges on the computer system, four (18%) officers claimed that they used their own discretion and six (27%) claimed that they appraised records in order to determine their disposal status. The dilemma of disposition was not surprising as e-mail records were sometimes managed by heads of ministries or departments and information technology staff, officers who had questionable credentials when it came to records management.

Transfer of E-mail Records

As stated above, transfer of e-mail records was more complicated than destruction. It was observed that transfer of e-mail records was more through making paper print-outs (73%) and thereafter transferring the paper records to the records center as was normally done with born paper records. Only 27% of the respondents claimed that they transferred e-mail messages from the Inbox to external storage devices like compact disks and flash disks. Unfortunately, the devices had never found their way to records centers in Zimbabwe which through observation, lacked capacity to store and preserve such devices. Transfer of e-mail records to secondary storage is shown on Table 3 below.

Table 3
Transfer of Paper Print-outs and External Storage Devices (N=22)

Secondary storage location	Paper print-outs	External storage devices
Records Centre	17	-
Storerooms	5	9
Cupboards	-	8
Other	-	5

No external storage devices had hitherto been transferred to a records center. Eight respondents kept compact disks and flash disks, upon which e-mail messages were saved, in cupboards in creators' offices, while nine kept them in storerooms and five in heads o f departments' cabinets. Personal observation revealed that these devices were kept in unsuitable conditions in many departments, which led to the deterioration of the devices. The case was rather different with paper print-outs, which normally were transferred to the records center with other paper records in line with the dictates of the retention/ disposal schedules. Nevertheless, while 17 respondents claimed that they transferred email paper print-outs to the records centers, five of them held that such print-outs were kept in storerooms.

Causes of the Dilemma in Disposing Records

Three reasons were put across by respondents to explain why public departments faced dilemmas in disposing email records. Nine (41%) respondents blamed it on the dawn of new technology, which was always changing, making it difficult for them to cope. Five (23%) blamed it on lack of knowledge about modern information and communication technologies and electronic records management, areas which they did not fully cover in their formal training. Eight (36%) respondents blamed it on the NAZ, which they accused of failing to stamp its authority on management of

electronic records in the country. Having identified the source of their dilemmas, informants stated that there was need to professionally manage e-mail records or else many organizations were going to lose valuable information for decision making and general administration in the near future. They therefore suggested that management of e-mail records was supposed to be seriously addressed by both the government and senior management within their institutions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The management of e-mail records falls under the management of electronic records. As noted by Wright (1997), electronic records management presents interesting challenges for many public sector departments. Similar sentiments were expressed by Mnjama and Wamukoya (2006) as well as Wato (2006) who noted that records managers and archivists faced serious challenges in managing e-records in the public sector. This has resulted in different records and non-records officers managing e-mail records as they pleased. Thus, Nengomasha and Beukes-Amiss (2002), Keakopa (2007) and Nengomasha (2009) hold that e-mail records are poorly disposed in many public organisations, leaving such organisations without records of administrative, informational and evidential value.

Amongst the causes of the dilemma to managing e-mail records are the following challenges. Firstly, the regulatory and legal framework governing e-records management in Zimbabwe is in shambles. As noted by Dube (2011) and Mutsagondo and Chaterera (2016), the National Archives of Zimbabwe Act of 1986 does not adequately cover the management of electronic records. Dube views the Act as obsolete and out-of touch with technological developments. Thus, while Nasieku (2012) holds that policies and guidelines to manage e-records are non-existent in many developing countries, Kamatula (2010) holds that electronic records laws in the developing world are many times nonexistent, weak or out-dated. Thus, respondents' views that the NAZ was supposed to stamp its authority when it came to e-records systems and policy issues holds water.

Secondly, e-mail management is seriously dented by deficiencies in information and communication technologies and electronic records management skills. As noted by Chaterera (2012), Mutsagondo (2017), Mutsagondo and Ngulube (2017) and Nasieku (2012), many officers who work with records have deficiencies in information and communication technologies and electronic records management, not only because these are new developments, but because such skills were not inculcated in them during their formal training. The situation was made worse by the fact that in some instances, personnel who managed records had not received any form of training in records management. Tsvuura and Mutsagondo (2015) who bemoaned such a stance noted that this anomaly was common in provincial and district public offices where a number of officers managing records were not trained in records management or were professionals from other backgrounds like secretarial and administration.

Thirdly, as noted by Nengomasha (2009), there is no policy and procedural framework in place for the management of e-mail records in the developing world as in the developed world. There is supposed to be a localized policy and procedural framework from which public departments can copy. Unfortunately, the situation currently obtaining is such that the cart has been placed before the horse, resulting in individual institutions resorting to own email records management policies and procedures as befitting their skills, resources and intuition.

CONCLUSIONS

The management of e-mail records needs to be seriously addressed in order to cover all aspects of managing such records, that is, creation, receipt, use, maintenance, transfer and destruction. The last two aspects, that is destruction and transfer, are very crucial as they dictate the availability of records now and in the future, a weapon to guard against litigation, fight corruption and shoddy deals and a tool to foster accountability, transparency and informed decision-making. The current scenario where each public department manages its email records according to its own discretion and resources is unacceptable and needs to be stopped. Ngulube (2012) sounds a warning that a relaxed approach to electronic records management (of which email management is a part) may sooner rather than later plunge the world into digital amnesia and the digital dark-age.

Recommendations

Five recommendations are hereby prescribed; NAZ should formulate e-mail records management policies and procedures, which the public sector should religiously follow. NAZ should monitor and supervise e-records management practices in public departments in the same manner it does in the case of paper records.

There is need for the public sector to make investments in e-mail management systems as well as modern information and communication technologies. Such systems and information and communication technologies enable public departments to manage records digitally, without resorting to traditional means like printing to paper. Investments should also be made in skills development, whereby personnel responsible for managing or handling records should be trained in e-records management as well as in modern information and communication technologies.

Disposition of e-mail records should be managed professionally, lest public organizations will in future find themselves without records of administrative, legal, fiscal and evidential value. Uncalled for destruction of e-mail records should be stopped forthwith. Organizations still caught on the horns of a dilemma due to infrastructural and human resources challenges can print e-mail records and treat them in the same manner as they treat born-paper records. However, this should be done temporarily while measures are put in place to convert public.

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