E-RECORDS READINESS AT THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT
With the adoption of e-government, large volumes of electronic records are being generated in several forms. As government services move online, electronic-records will be the basis for confirming pension and other entitlements, registering births and deaths, verifying citizenship and certifying voting rights, enabling the collection of taxes and census enumeration, supporting financial management and enabling audits and evaluations, helping resolve land claims, supporting litigation, documenting inter-governmental agreements, enabling economic planning, describing the government’s accomplishments, documenting its transgressions, monitoring the nation’s development and governance, and enabling countless other information intensive activities (IRMT 2004). Just as in paper-based records that are preserved at the national archives for public consumption, e-records should be awarded the same status and attention. Archival institutions should be able to accept electronic records produced by government departments since these records are vital to the operation of the country and interacting with its citizens. This article seeks to assess the electronic-readiness of the National Archives of Zimbabwe, since the management of e-records is one area that has challenged archivists and records managers, especially in developing countries. The article also aims to examine whether the archival institution has the necessary resources for the preservation of e-records. These archival resources include staff skills and the institutional infrastructure, both of which assist government departments in addressing the problems they face in promoting the archival perspective within government departments.
INTRODUCTION

The rapidly evolving information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been embraced by a number of institutions, including archival institutions, due to the obvious benefits that may be derived from employing such tools. ICTs are increasingly being embraced in African countries, as pointed out by Lipchak and McDonald (2003). This article builds on a survey conducted by Wato (2006) to determine the e-records readiness status of various national archives in the East and Central Africa Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (ESARBICA). The e-records readiness of the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) was also assessed, and this article seeks to determine the attempts undertaken to date, by the archives to embrace e-records management issues. Assessing the e-records readiness at the National Archives of Zimbabwe raises several questions such as: Is e-records readiness a measurable concept? What is the role of NAZ in managing e-records generated by the public sector? What current efforts are being put in place by NAZ towards e-records management?

E-GOVERNMENT AND E-RECORDS

There are different views as to what constitutes e-government. Most definitions touch on part of what e-government entails (Ngulube 2010). It involves the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to improve the delivery of government services and information, enhance the efficiency and accountability of the public administration and strengthen economic performance (IRMT 2004; Onyancha 2009; Kumar, Murkeji, Butt & Persuad 2007; World Bank 2004). To put it differently, e-government may be characterised as an innovative attempt to take advantage of information and communication technologies to facilitate access to government information and services in order to support social, economic and political development, improve the quality of public services, and provide an opportunity for government-to-government (G2G), government-to-business (G2B) and government-to-citizens (G2C) communication (Ngulube 2010).

The implementation of e-government in the world has necessitated the emergence of electronic records. Wato (2006) echoes the same sentiments as he points out that issues related to e-records are inseparable from e-government issues. The electronic delivery of services to business and citizens will produce electronic records as evidence in individual transactions. The evidence will need to be retained as records which can demonstrate accountability and preserve reliable access. The replacement of manual and paper-based processes with electronic processes in government administration will generate electronic records as evidence in policy-making, casework and service delivery
areas. These transactional records will be generated by new forms of service delivery as electronic transactions are received from business and citizens, and processed in one or several departments.

According to Kamatula (2010:152) e-records are the by-products of e-government functions where information is represented in digital form, be it text, graphics, data, audio or pictorial. Information generated in electronic form, provides crucial improvements in the efficiency and effectiveness of service provision as citizens are able to interact with government agencies online, without necessarily having to visit the offices physically. Mnjama and Wamukoya (2006:277) state:

The emergence of e-government has resulted in the creation of e-records and the information they contain is indeed a valuable asset that must be managed and protected. Besides providing essential evidence of organisational activities, transactions and decisions, e-records also support business functions and are critical for the assessment of organisational performance. Without reliable e-records governments cannot manage state resources, its revenue or civil service. It cannot deliver services such as education and healthcare. Moreover, without accurate and reliable e-records and an effective system to manage them, governments cannot be held accountable for their decisions and actions and the rights and obligations of citizens and corporate bodies cannot be upheld.

The intended benefits of e-government will be compromised unless there is an adequate infrastructure for managing the e-records that will be created. Traditional records and information management tools, such as classification schemes and disposal schedules, are necessary to ensure that e-records are protected as reliable evidence. Failing to address e-records issues as a component of e-government will jeopardise the substantial financial investment required to launch e-government services. In the digital environment, not only is there a risk of reduced government programme effectiveness due to poor records and information management, but governments can face increased operating costs, gaps in recorded memory, reduced public access to entitlements and the erosion of rights, inability to comply with laws and policies, weakened capacity for decision-making, increased legal, financial and political risk and reduced transparency, accountability and trust.

3 E-GOVERNMENT IN ZIMBABWE

The implementation of e-government in Zimbabwe has progressed steadily over the years. According to the United Nations’ (2005), e-readiness rankings, Zimbabwe recorded an index of 0.3312 and advanced 10 points on its global ranking. It was also noted from the survey that Zimbabwe’s national site, http://www.gta.gov.zw, made some incremental improvements as the country enhanced its e-readiness in several areas, notably by providing several stand-alone ministry sites previously unavailable. For example, the new Ministry of Education site, http://www.moesc.gov.zw, features
fairly substantial sections on programmes, services and publications, as well as on news and other general information. While several areas of the site were still under construction at the time of review, its mere presence was a definitive first step towards offering Zimbabweans an online source for official information about the educational system (United Nations 2005).

The history of ICT in Zimbabwe in general and e-government in particular, can be traced back to 1972 with the establishment of the Central Computing Services (CSS), which was aimed at providing ICT services to the public service (COMESA 2011). In its 2010-2014 Strategic Plan, the Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies alludes to the fact that the Government of Zimbabwe has progressively shown an awareness and deep appreciation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) since the inception of the Central Computing Services in 1972, which then fell under the Ministry of Finance and had a mandate to provide a central computer facility to all government ministries and departments.

This was then followed with the adoption of the Integrated Results-Based Management (IRBM) System in 2005, in which the government would be an integral component and one of the three important underpinners of the main pillars or cornerstones of the system. Thereafter, following the advent of the Inclusive Government under the Global Political Agreement, a fully fledged Ministry of Information and Communication Technologies was established with the mandate of promoting ICTs to enhance national competitiveness and socio-economic growth based on the United Nations e-government measurement criteria (COMESA 2011).

Examples of initiatives which have so far been undertaken by the Zimbabwe Government towards e-governance are the Public Finance Management System (PFMS) and the Zimbabwe Integrated Performance Management Solution (ZIPMAS) systems. PFMS is an electronic system used within government to process financial transactions. ZIPMAS is also a consolidated electronic system used by the Government of Zimbabwe for reporting, evaluating and processing financial transactions and staff appraisals.

Having highlighted the concept of e-governance in Zimbabwe, it has become clear that electronic records are being generated in Zimbabwe’s public sector and hence there is a need for proper e-records management which is required for government accountability, good governance and the protection of human rights.

4 ARCHIVAL INSTITUTIONS AND E-RECORDS MANAGEMENT

The national archives is, and should be recognized as an administrative unit of government able to improve efficiency, ensure accountability and reduce public expense through the effective management of records (Millar 2003 in Ndenje-Sichalwe and
Ngulube 2009). The International Council on Archives [ICA] (2005) points out that an archival institution in an electronic environment should:

- facilitate the establishment of policies, procedures, systems, standards and practices designed to assist the creators of such records to create and retain records which are authentic, reliable and preservable
- be involved in the entire records life-cycle (conception, creation and maintenance) to ensure the capture, preservation and continued accessibility of records identified as having archival value
- manage the review of records in order to identify those of archival value, and
- define the requirements for preservation and accessibility to ensure that archival records remain available, accessible, and understandable through time

The national archives should move away from its image as a repository of cultural memory and emphasise its role as an essential instrument in achieving accountability and securing evidence of governmental business transactions. Without an archives management system with formal authority and a legal mandate in records management, governments risk the haphazard, inconsistent or negligent treatment of records. This, in turn, creates serious consequences for the accountability and trustworthiness of government actions as a whole. Archival institutions are warned that if they do not involve themselves in the records creation process for electronic systems, they run the risk that these systems will not provide adequate and authentic records to solve long term institutional and societal problems (Bantin).

5 THE CONCEPT OF E-RECORDS READINESS

By definition and scope, e-readiness and e-records readiness are distinct concepts but highly complementary (Kalusopa 2010). E-readiness forms a platform for e-records readiness (Moloi 2009). Choucri et al (2003) posit that e-readiness is a relatively new concept that has been given impetus due to the dramatic advances in the use of information communication technologies, and more particularly the rapid rate of internet penetration throughout the world in business and industry. The United Nations University (2011) postulates that e-readiness measures how well a society is positioned to utilise the opportunities provided by ICT. ICT infrastructure, human capital, regulations, policies and internet penetration are all crucial components of e-readiness (Kalusopa & Ngulube 2012). E-records readiness, on the other hand, can be defined as the depth and breadth, or the capacity of organisations in having the required institutional and legal frameworks, with an ICT infrastructure anchored on a systematic records and information management programme (IRMT 2004). In other words, whereas e-readiness may be described as the generic degree to which a society is prepared to participate in an e-environment,
e-records readiness goes far beyond to measure the extent to which organisations have e-records management systems that ensure that e-records, like its earlier counterpart, the traditional paper records, are captured and managed and conform to the obligatory recordkeeping practices that ensure that records are protected for informational and evidential purposes (IRMT 2004).

6 NAZ AND E-RECORDS READINESS

The NAZ is mandated by the *NAZ Act* 8 of 1986 [chapter 25:06] to be the custodian of Zimbabwe’s heritage, irrespective of format. NAZ seeks to be the leading custodian and provider of the documentary heritage of Zimbabwe as evidenced by the mission statement. Its mission is to acquire, preserve and provide public access to Zimbabwean documentation in whatever format, in an efficient and economic manner. The institution’s purpose is built around ensuring the preservation of the country’s documentary heritage. Sub-section 2 of the *NAZ Act*, as described in section 6, states that the Director can inspect and examine the records of any ministry, and give advice or instruction concerning the filing, maintenance and preservation of records generated by any ministry. This calls for NAZ to have the capacity to handle e-records in a way similar to the maintenance of paper records.

With e-government being implemented in Zimbabwe, digital information, or e-records that document government transactions and online activities are also being produced. It is therefore important that NAZ ensures that standards are developed and implemented, that appropriate facilities are created and that adequate resources are invested in managing official records in digital and other formats. NAZ, therefore, should be able to render advice, accept, maintain and preserve records in any format, including electronic records. With this mandate bestowed upon the institution, NAZ should ensure that they are ready to preserve records in any format, thus making an e-records assessment of this nature crucial.

The question of readiness is not a matter of whether or not an archive is ready to begin work on electronic records, as no system will ever be completely ready. Rather, the question is what the archive is ready to attempt (ICA 2005 quoted in Wato 2006). Nengomasha (2009) alludes to the fact that an investigation, or an assessment of e-records readiness should be conducted in order to establish the current status of e-records management, and to determine whether or not the environment is conducive to the creation and preservation of e-records. A brief questionnaire was sent to the five heads of the provincial archives to ascertain the extent to which NAZ was ready to handle e-records from government departments. Additionally, interviews were conducted with the Director of NAZ and with the Chief Records Management Officer stationed at the headquarters of NAZ in Harare.
7 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings from the study revealed that, while there are departments that are producing e-records, for example, the Central Vehicle Registry (CVR), the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA) and Tourism, NAZ is not performing an active role in managing these e-records. Therefore there is a need for NAZ to play a proactive role by stipulating the premises in which e-records can be maintained within the creating departments and the archival institution. Thus, the inclusion of standards that are applied by all creating departments is necessary.

The study further revealed that currently, there is no existing ICT policy, thus the circumstances in which e-records can be maintained are not clearly laid down. Moreover, the NAZ Act does not clearly spell out what e-records are. That makes the establishment of the scope of their management somewhat of a challenge. At present, government departments therefore manage e-records according to the systems which best suit their institutions, which may not necessarily provide for adequate preservation standards.

The findings revealed that NAZ does not have adequate infrastructure to cater for e-records preservation as this would need specialised equipment like servers to cater for the anticipated voluminous deposits of e-records. The lack of suitable infrastructure, that is, the necessary hardware and software, would compromise the benefits of e-governance. However, it was revealed from the study that NAZ is in the process of formulating an electronic records-keeping system under the Temporary Digital Repository. Unfortunately, at this time, staff members have limited skills and knowledge in managing e-records, despite the fact that most of them are computer literate.

8 CONCLUSION AND THE WAY FORWARD

In paving the way for a viable e-government strategy and e-readiness, there is a need for a legislative and policy framework that facilitates the smooth flow of operations within the e-environment. Thus, there is a need for restructuring the NAZ Act to clearly specify the standards required for proper e-records management, vis-à-vis simply including them under the vague and ambiguous statement: “regardless of format”. Lessons learnt from the South African Archives Act reveal the need for such a strategy as the Act clearly stipulates the management of e-records as the mandate of the archives, and clearly defines the scope and nature of e-records. This leads to the need for standardisation in the maintenance of e-records within the creating departments, similar to the standards created for the management of paper records.

While most of the staff members at NAZ are computer literate, there is a need for special training to enhance the IT capabilities of employees who are going to be involved directly with the preservation of e-records, as this is a highly specialised field. Thus, much work
remains to be done in order to effectively and efficiently deliver e-government services, offer efficient information services and achieve the efficiency and accountability required within the public administration system, thereby strengthening economic performance in an environment which, currently, is not e-records ready.

REFERENCES


