

Theme 1

Planning for Records Management Requirements in ICT Systems

Introduction

This discussion paper explores issues relating to the management of records created electronically and the need to ensure that they provide complete and reliable evidence over time. It is based on a study called *Aligning Records Management with ICT, e-Government and Freedom of Information in East Africa*, funded by the International Development Research Centre and conducted by the International Records Management Trust. The research was carried out across the East African Community by national teams in each of the constituent countries: Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda. The study has identified a consistent lack of planning for the management of electronic records generated by or stored in government ICT systems.

The Need to Manage Records is Just as Important in the Electronic Environment as in the Paper Environment

The research has shown that staff in government organisations across the region tend to feel that electronic systems are inherently secure. Many of those interviewed felt that records would be easier to manage in electronic systems, not realising that mismanagement would be even easier than with paper records. Despite their awareness of the importance of good record-keeping for the proper management of government resources, they had not begun planning for records management functionality in ICT systems.

What Does Planning for Records Management Involve?

Records managers have an important contribution to make to ICT development. Their knowledge of the business, its functions, activities and processes can help support the enterprise architecture component of ICT strategies, and their knowledge of classification, description, and preservation can help address the data and information management dimensions.

At the technical level, planning for records management functionality in ICT systems involves addressing issues in the broad areas of records creation (including capture, identification and classification), maintenance (including access and security, tracking record movement, retention and disposal, migration, export and destruction), dissemination (searching, retrieving and rendering (displaying, printing and redacting)), and administration (reporting, back up and recovery). Each of these aspects of records management needs to be considered in the design of ICT systems. For example, the records creation process, alone, raises questions such as:

- What are the business processes that enable the organisation to fulfil its function?

- Where, in these processes, are records of decisions, actions and transactions created?
- Where should they be created? In what formats are they created?
- Once records are created by the system, when and how are they captured?
- How can alteration or destruction of the record during capture be prevented?
- How are the records named? Is naming automatic or manual? If automatic, from which record elements is the name derived? If manual, how will naming conventions be designed?
- How is metadata assigned to a record? How can automatic extraction or migration of metadata be supported?
- Can metadata be viewed by system users? Can additional metadata be added by users? If so, which users, and which kinds of metadata will be mandatory and which optional?

Causes of the Lack of Planning for Records Management Requirements in ICT Systems

The research has identified a number of interconnected factors that have contributed to the lack of planning for records management in the region.

Records management is viewed as a para-profession within the public service. Records management schemes of service are limited or do not exist, providing only limited opportunities for professional advancement. As a result, the records management function is often not represented at senior level, with no one taking the lead on records management. Often this is because records are not seen as valuable assets.

Some governments are taking steps to improve schemes of service for records managers, but they face the challenge of recruiting suitably qualified personnel. University programmes in records management are available in the region, but they do not yet have the necessary capacity in electronic records management, and the records professionals that they train are not equipped to work effectively with their ICT counterparts.

The combination of this failure to recognise the value of records and the lack of expertise in electronic records management in the region is already having an impact as government organisations make the transition to the electronic environment. By extension, this affects services to citizens and citizens' rights.

Consequences of the Lack of Planning for Records Management Functionality in ICT Systems

Over time, government organisations are likely to face difficulties when they need to retrieve or audit records that have been created electronically or digitised if records management requirements for storage, access, description and disposition have not been addressed. For instance, electronic records cannot be read as a result of a lack of a data migration policy; electronic records cannot be located because appropriate metadata was not captured; vital electronic records cannot easily be identified because all electronic

documents are kept, including those with short term value, as a result of the lack of a retention policy.

To ensure that government information is complete, authentic and secure, careful planning for records management requirements in ICT systems must be undertaken within the context of sound legal frameworks, policies and procedures.

Consequences of the Lack of Planning for Co-ordinated Records Management Across Systems

The study showed that in a number of government organisations across the region, the authenticity and reliability of government records was jeopardised by the lack of planning to enable sharing records between different ICT systems. For instance, in one Ministry of Finance, there were four major electronic systems in use. Although these systems depended on access to the same records, they were developed independently and were not connected, either to each other or to systems managed by other government organisations. When data in one system were needed in another system, the information was downloaded, printed and input manually. Staff claimed that the ICT systems had improved efficiency and streamlined processes, but the lack of system integration was causing delays when data transfer was required.

This situation posed threats to the security of government information because each additional step created an opportunity for human error or tampering with the records. Although the electronic systems were expected to ensure the authenticity of the records and eliminate human error and fraud, the Ministry had identified a number of data entry errors and cases of fraud since the systems went into use.

There was also a problem with information sharing between headquarters and up-country offices. In a number of instances, processes had only been computerised in the central office, which meant that information from hardcopy records received from up-country had to be input on receipt at headquarters. It was felt that errors made during this inputting process had caused the loss of a number of court cases. A local area network had been established for the central office. The department intended to extend this to offices up-country but could not do so until fibre-optic cables had been installed. If records management had been considered in the planning for the computerisation of the central office, the threats to the authenticity and security of the information posed by these information sharing processes could have been identified, and data entry errors reduced.

Discussion Questions

Question 1: The lack of schemes of service and training programmes for records managers has been identified as a factor in the governments' ability to manage their records in the electronic environment. How can governments address this problem?

Question 2: The lack of co-ordination between systems has been identified as an issue by governments in the region. A number of agencies and boards have been established in each of the countries studied to address this lack of co-ordination. How is the lack of attention to records management impeding these agencies and boards from fulfilling their mandate to co-ordinate ICT implementation?

Question 3: Standards have been developed internationally for introducing records management requirements in ICT systems. However, governments and standards bureaux in the East African region have not adopted/adapted these standards. Why is this the case, and what steps could be taken to support the introduction of good practice standards in the region?