

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT: NEED FOR A REVOLUTIONARY SOLUTION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Destruction of public offices along with vital records and information are not new in Nigeria. The incidents happen so often that one wonders why the country is caught napping each time it occurs. Almost every regime over the past three decades has experienced such losses. Modern systems of keeping records through Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools have improved the way records and management of information are kept. ICT has also improved the way of keeping records to an extent that it aids transparency. With proper information management in place, mostly using ICT tools, government would curtail corruption in the land. What is known in government circles as '10% deal' would be over. This paper will, in addition, highlight on the application of the emerging technologies for organizational efficiency.

Introduction

Information Management dates back to early centuries when the primitive man relayed or kept information by use of gesticulation, smoke, scratching records on rocks and performing counting, using his fingers, toes, and pebbles. Information Management is concerned with preservation of data and records for the purpose of controlling, handling, and directing information in an organization.

A brief look into past events reveals that the NET building was razed down during the Shehu Shagari administration (1993). The Defence House was lost to fire during president Babangida's time (1987). Chief Obasanjo's administration witnessed the destruction of NNPC building (2002) before the latest inferno that consumed the Lagos and Kaduna offices of the National Agency for Drug Administration and Control-NAFDAC (2004). This is to mention but a few in Federal establishments. Similar situations in other tiers of government - states and local government councils are pathetic. At one time, one wonders why Nigeria has not taken documentation seriously and do not attach any importance to them (Thisday, 2004). In all cases, suspicions were that those who have cases to answer for the various managerial offences were behind the fiery destruction; ostensibly to destroy vital evidence that could be used to prosecute them.

Not only that it is bad that costly infrastructure are destroyed, it is even worse to lose organizational data and information. Tokunbo (1996), agrees that there is the need for a new culture of records and information management as a solution to business survival even as millions of man-hours are spent on records and information searching, yearly. This, in effect, reduces staff productivity, resulting to loss of billions of naira. It is essential that businesses, organizations, and government agencies evolve the culture of keeping electronic files and automated information management.

Hindrances To Proper Handling of Records and Information Storage/Retrieval

Arsonists are not the only enemies of public records. Carelessness and mischief of those in charge of such records may also be hindrances to proper handling of records and information storage and retrieval. Sometimes important files may be missing because they were not properly stored. The possible danger to records and information is infinite.

Access to records has been a serious problem to date. For instance, pensioners queue up in harsh weather to confirm their records (Thisday, September, 2003); voters wearily on queues during voters' register reviews students spend weeks to collect their statements of results and even months to get confirmation that their transcripts have reached their various destinations, barring delay from postal networks. Numerous similar situations exist in other organizations nationwide.

Most often, when paper files are borrowed, they might be lost on some other employees' desks. Studies by professionals show that up to 500 productive hours are being lost to records and information searching yearly (Infosystems, 2003). This adversely affects the productivity volume of employees.

Today, productivity is enhanced by speed of light, thereby, improving the production capacity

of any organization. It is therefore imperative to always make sure that all useful information and records are carefully protected to the advantage of the organization and the public at large.

Application of the Emerging Technologies (ICTs) in Information Management

As the information is the livewire of any organization so is data acting as the blood stream. The organization ceases to exist in the absence of data and/or information (Ezeorah, 2003). This fact further reveals that all kinds of records are essential to the efficiency, scrutiny, continuity, accountability, human resources development, and sustenance as well as performance in the organization's core area of competence. Once information is lost an organization is set back many steps and many years. Therefore, there is need to protect public records more effectively and to make information easily retrievable and accessible from any location in the world. It appears, therefore, that the country has no choice but to revolutionize its records' systems format and processes.

The hardcopy archive system is not only out of use with the 21st century, but easily lends itself to tampering uncontrollably (like change of date of birth to perpetuate stay in office) and wanton destruction (like arson and mutilation of forms and documents to conceal sharp practices). Also, such paper information occupies much space thereby creating an ever increasing need for physical storage space.

With the emerging technologies, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) — Internet and GSM facilities, basic functions of organizations mentioned in the previous section can hitherto be carried out in remote business centres or from the comfort of our homes and/or offices (Ikoro, 2004). A man who confirms his data on the voters' register needs not leave his home or office for anything until the voting day. A pensioner who confirms, from his village, that his pension has been paid needs not travel anywhere except to draw his money from a nearby bank. A government official who goes to court need not risk carrying sensitive information in physical destructible form, and students need not queue up to check or collect scores and/or other examination information with modern records and information storage system in place.

Benefits of Online Storage (or Electronic Filing) in Organizations

The technologies for storing data have improved so tremendously that there is no limit to the volume of information that can be warehoused technologically and accessed with touch-button speed. Electronic information management process may be expensive, but it is cheap in the long run, considering what is saved from vandals and natural disasters. Staff records, financial records, operational files and documents are more easily handled, updated, retrieved, and forwarded as may be required in electronic format. Most often, and importantly too, they are produced in copies as backups and stored at remote sites, meant for data and information recreation, in case of any disaster.

Beyond mere computerization, the World Wide Web (WWW) is a safe-store for information. Records posted on the Internet can never be destroyed or vandalized. Such information can also be retrieved from anywhere at any time and yet it is also safe for those who have no business with such information (Ikoro, 2004). Nigeria could borrow a leaf from other developing countries like Singapore, South Africa and India, where voters' registers are digital documents.

Globalization eliminates guess work, and misrepresentation by those within and outside the country who may need such information to transact business with the country, especially the investors, researchers, students and international organizations. For example, the country's daily commercial intelligence, demographic records, pension's records, land register, admissions and other academic data, and such public information should be made available to the public online. In addition, classified documents, records and financial information should be converted from hardcopies to electronic data and vaulted on the web, only to be accessed by certified staff. That way, those who perpetuate fraud would not be able to cover up their footprints by vandalizing public property. Other beneficial areas include:

- Enhancement of customer and client services via increasing ability to find and manage valuable records and documents.
- Increasing executive and managerial effectiveness and staff productivity through

having the right information at the right time for appropriate decision-making and keeping the user abreast of contemporary and proven technology and business practice (Nweke, 2004).

- Automation of documentation helps to achieve substantial reduction in volumes of records, documents, files and boxes for a single file room up to a global enterprise, as well as strengthens legal compliance and litigation.
- It improves profits and bottom line position while leveraging legacy systems and data with seamless integration.
- It helps in developing the archiving of information and the rapid search for any word in folders as well as ensures rapid retrieval through indexing.
- It accelerates multiple sharing of documents to many users at the same time and at the right time as in the Internet service.
- The Internet services have been so customized that it is made possible for millions of people world-wide to use it at the same time for the same purpose or different purposes, thereby enhancing discretionary (or individually distinct) access to documents.

Recommendations

The need for the establishment of computer-based record management system in ministries and para-ministries of all tiers of government in Nigeria cannot be over-estimated. In view of the foregoing, the following recommendations are made:

- Awareness and Education: Highly skilled educated personnel and professionals need to be trained and retrained to facilitate websites up-to-date so as to meet the realities of world events.
- Records management personnel should adopt records retention schedule which can only be done after a thorough study of the record requirements of the establishment. Legal counsel should always be sought and once the schedule is adopted, it should continually be revised in order to meet changing conditions and needs of the environment.
- Provision of websites for the organizations concerned to safeguard and centralize appropriate record management.
- Provision of functional desktop/laptop computers and other ancillary equipment (e.g. UPS, stabilizers, VSAT, appropriate cabling system, etc.) for use by data processing personnel and other intra- and/or inter-connecting departments.
- Provision of a 24-hour service power supply through local or national grid system.
- Provision of tax relief to ISPs during importation of Internet-related equipment since over 90% of such materials is procured externally. There is also the need for the government to subsidize procurement of bandwidths by Internet-based organizations (e.g., ISPs) so that clients' charges would be minimal.
- Stabilization of exchange rate in the international market.
- Government's reduction of interests on loans by ISPs when sourcing fund to procure materials for their operations.

Conclusion

The day-to-day activities of every human being, organization and government agency require the

availability of up-to-date records and information to succeed. Therefore individuals, organizations, and government establishments should imbibe the culture of good records and information management.

The revolution from a paper nation to an electronic nation would not only safeguard information, but would also expand the local information technology industry, create jobs and encourage development of local software to meet the emerging demands. It is anachronic for a country of Nigeria's status to remain at the mercy of pedestrian information vandals and arsonists. The emerging technologies can be put to use, effectively, to safeguard sensitive information in all establishments through electronic filing system.

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