

## **RECORDS & INFORMATION MANAGEMENT (RIM)** **Benefiting the Public Sector**

Throughout the world, all organizations, whether large or small, public or private, have one thing in common - Each produces records and information. Both public and private sector organisations depend on information to make critical strategic decisions, protect rights, and manage projects, process transactions and service customers. This information is contained in the organization's records. Like cash, business records are strategic operational assets and like their counterparts in law, accounting and human resources, record keeping issues are best handled by experienced professionals.

Information is one of the world's most important resources. It is needed daily to solve problems and make decisions affecting the future, therefore what people accomplish in organizations depends largely upon the information that they possess and can be made available to them. Increasingly, the degree of success enjoyed depends on how well the information resource is managed. Proper management of the information that we create and receive in the public sector is indeed an asset and a resource of strategic importance.

When one refers to information, it encompasses the entire sphere of records, documents, data and files created, received and maintained. Information is generated and transmitted countless times every minute of every day. Some information is generated internally within the ministry or department that owns it, while other information is received from external sources. **Information that is not communicated is valueless and information that cannot be found is worthless.** Thus, the value of information is directly related to its accessibility, and sound records management is needed to provide the necessary high level of accessibility.

Records management is the *“field of management responsible for the efficient and systematic control of the creation, receipt, maintenance, and disposition of records – including capturing and maintaining evidence of and information about business activities and transactions in the form of records”* (ISO 15489 RM Std).

Its objectives include *inter alia*; furnishing accurate, timely, and complete information for efficient decision making, the processing of recorded information as efficiently as possible, the provision of information and records at the lowest possible cost, rendering maximum service to the user of the records and the disposition of records no longer needed. These objectives are based primarily upon three factors, service, cost avoidance and social responsibility. Service is of great importance because recorded information is needed by others so that their work is performed most effectively and efficiently. So too, reducing the cost of doing business is important in the public service. Social Responsibility is also important because the attainment of public sector goals must be in accordance with the moral, ethical and legal codes of the society in which we operate.

One of the core concepts of records management is the *life cycle* ( see page ..... ) concept which appropriate records management controls are applied to the records during each of the major stages in their life cycle. The other core concept in record keeping is that of *the life continuum*, the idea of which is not to indicate a lifespan or otherwise of records but

to indicate how such records should be managed, and the chain of responsibility. In other words, a series of rather indistinct phases continue and any one of the above mentioned *life-cycle* stages could possibly occur at any time particularly in the case of the electronic record.

Organizations make investments in records management systems and programmes in order to realize their business benefits. These include controlling the creation and growth of records, reducing the costs associated with record keeping and improving the efficiency and productivity of those who must handle and process the records through training and implementation. RIM systems are an integral part of integrating new technologies into the business and ensuring compliance with government imposed record keeping requirements which exist. Adequate systems can be employed to minimize the risk of litigation, safeguard vital information and support better management decision-making, whilst preserving records of archival value and fostering professionalism in the running of the office.

These programs of course vary widely in scope and content in business and government organizations, but most contain a combination of some or all of the following: Records inventories, records retention and disposition schedules, vital records programmes, disaster recovery programmes, programmes to enhance the management of active files, electronic records management programmes, micro-graphics and optical disk filing systems, establishing a records centre for the management of inactive records and an archives management programme.

Technology now plays a critical role in records and information management. It creates new opportunities by simplifying office work, allowing improved access and compliance, sharing records and information simultaneously, combining and analyzing data. All of this in “record” time. We have however to be mindful of the challenges which present themselves with the technology. Records and information managers need to be cognizant of the complexity of systems, the fact that e-records are easy to alter, duplicate and locate, problems of transmission and linkage and their resulting possible lack of authenticity and reliability and difficulty in preserving. So too, it is important for RIM managers to be *au fait* with requirements and functionalities for records management systems as opposed to those of document management systems.

Although, good records management will help all organizations achieve their goals, many organisations rely on traditional and sometimes idiosyncratic record keeping practices under which one could survive with small numbers of records. In this way, their operations tend to be less than effective and do not achieve optimum benefits, instead reaching in some cases, near crisis in today’s world of overwhelming records of differing media and formats. One major reason for this is the fact that these programs are usually discretionary and may not be in the business of generating revenues as such. Nevertheless, one should also keep in mind that these programmes can reduce operating costs and speed up the decision making process, which in turn would allow us to be both more effective and efficient in our processes. Sometimes, lack of the available expertise in the area may account for this reluctance as well. Therefore, it is imperative that

training be a strong feature in any organisation that is embarking on a records management programme. Within its outreach programme, The University of the West Indies has recognized the dearth of knowledge in the practice of records management in the Caribbean region and has sought to complement this area by providing on-going training in records management which would empower support staff in all institutions and organisations to carry out the aforementioned systematic management of records with particular emphasis on core practices and the management of electronic records inclusive of e-mail. Training would ensure the much needed consistency in record keeping practices throughout in the public sector and also allow for the creation of a career path for records services officers.

Good record keeping allows for good governance, protects rights and interests, ensures essential evidence, enables accountability for actions, improves the delivery of services, reduces exposure to legal, financial and political risks and ultimately results in good archives which form part of our collective memory and our heritage. Good record and information keeping is everybody's business. Can a systematic records and information management programme benefit the public sector? The answer must undoubtedly be YES as the inherent risks of not properly managing your recorded information in today's technology driven, fast-paced, globalised world makes it imperative that we so do.

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