

## **The Role of the Department of Archives in Public Sector Records Management in Barbados**

**by David Williams**

A traditional definition of a record is: “any discrete item of information, regardless of its physical form.” Some examples of records are: letters, reports, contracts, manuals, forms, lists of all kinds, receipts and bills. It is also true that records can exist in many different forms e.g. paper, electronic mail, microfilm, diskettes, magnetic tape, CDs and DVDs. A closer look will show, however, that it is really the information itself that constitutes the record, not the storage medium, because, as is well known, information can be easily transferred between the different types of media. Public records, with which this article is concerned, are records produced by governments, and they too, exist in many different forms as is evident from the definition of a public record as given in the Archives Act Cap 19B:

“...any original or copy of any manuscript, paper, letter, register, report, book, magazine, map, chart, plan, drawing, picture, photograph or machine-readable record or part thereof produced on paper or any other material, except granite, and officially received or produced or prepared in any public office in the course of its official functions...”

This is of necessity a very broad definition (although we are not sure exactly why granite is excluded), but most of the records traditionally produced by governments have been in paper format, and continue to be, despite the fact that today a great deal of the information which constitutes records is now stored on hard drives, flash drives, CDs, DVDs, etc. Despite this, however, the much vaunted “paperless office” does not loom on the horizon at the moment, and will not appear for some time to come, at least until offices stop converting so much of their electronic information to paper, and until issues connected to the admissibility of electronic records as evidence in courts are sorted out.

Regardless of their physical format, all records have a “life cycle.” There is a period, after creation, in which all records are “active” and serve a useful purpose, but there will come a time when some records are no longer needed, when the information that constitutes the record ceases to be of value. Records such as shopping lists, bus tickets and most receipts may become useless very quickly. While other records, such as deeds, wills and birth certificates have a permanent, enduring value.

The Life Cycle of records therefore, consists of the following stages:

### **BIRTH**

Records are created in offices. Letters are written and received. New files are opened. Correspondence is placed on them.

### **ACTIVE/CURRENT**

Records are used in offices in the regular, day to day transaction of business.

### SEMI-ACTIVE/SEMI-CURRENT

Records are accessed less frequently than at the active stage.

### INACTIVE/NON-CURRENT RECORDS

Files are closed and records are rarely accessed. Some are retained for legal, fiscal or historical reasons and are sent to the Archives for permanent preservation. Others are destroyed because they have no further value.

Records management, then, is the systematic administration and control of records throughout their life cycle from creation to ultimate disposition, which means either preservation as archives or destruction.

Records management is especially critical at the stage of the life cycle when files are closed and are rarely required for use by their creators. What is done with such records at this stage is very dependent upon whether or not records management procedures are in place. This can make all the difference in determining whether valuable information is lost or is made available to the agency for use when required, sometimes for crucial policy decisions.

### **The Current Situation**

There is currently no standardised, uniform or effective system of managing non-current or closed records in ministries and departments of the Barbados public service.

This means, in effect, that each agency “does its own thing” with regard to the disposition of records. What usually happens is that when files are closed they are consigned to cupboards, basements, storerooms or even containers. These repositories are usually referred to as “archives,” but are actually “records centres” or intermediate storage repositories for semi-current records. Sometimes the records are not maintained in any systematic order, thus making identification and retrieval extremely difficult and sometimes impossible.

When this happens, staff often blame the filing system. Visits to several government departments experiencing this problem, however, have shown that the filing systems are not to blame. While it is not within the scope of this article to examine the merits and demerits of different types of filing systems, it is a fact that most departments in Barbados use variations of an alpha-numeric system, which, if consistently used and properly maintained, is quite efficient.

### **The Problem**

The real problem is that there is no effective means of identifying and separating non-current files from semi-current ones and providing for their disposition, (which means either permanent or temporary retention or destruction). In such situations files pile up and offices soon run out of storage space. The files also suffer a great deal from physical

deterioration due to bad handling and storage in less than ideal environmental conditions. This can lead to the loss of much valuable information and oftentimes, useless files that could be destroyed (once the requisite approval is obtained) are kept and this exacerbates the space problem.

It is usually at this stage that the Department of Archives is called in and is expected to solve all problems and rectify all wrongs by removing the “old files.” Many public officers become quite annoyed when told that we cannot do that. That is not the way, however, that archives are supposed to operate. We are not “garbage dumps.” The purpose of an archival institution (in this case a national archives) is to identify, obtain and preserve for posterity those records that are of enduring legal, cultural or historical value and are therefore deemed worthy of permanent preservation. Those are the only records that should ever be found in an archives.

### **The Solution**

The solution to the problem is to implement, throughout the public service, a programme under which, as part of a continuous process, the value of records will be appraised or assessed at the point of closure in departments, and time periods for retention assigned (this is called “scheduling”), so that records which have archival value will be identified immediately and sent to the Archives for permanent preservation and those that have no further value will be destroyed. Those files which are not archival, but cannot be immediately destroyed because they are still needed for reference from time to time, will be stored in records centres for an assigned period, pending further appraisal.

The Department of Archives is responsible for records management in the public sector, but until the promulgation of the Archives Act Cap 19B in 2001, it was hindered in its efforts to implement a national records management programme by the absence of enabling legislation which would have given its procedures the force of law. This absence of legislation meant that the Archives has had to act in somewhat of a consultative capacity where records management is concerned, providing assistance and advice to those ministries and departments which requested it on a voluntary basis.

In 1982 a document entitled **Disposition of Records: Government of Barbados** was published by the then Ministry of Information and Culture, which held responsibility for archives at that time. This handbook, largely the work of a UNESCO consultant, outlines the procedures and guidelines to be used in running a records management programme and was meant to be a records manual for use in the Barbados public service. It was intended that the manual would be used by all government agencies to administer their records management systems under the supervision of the Department of Archives, but this did not materialise largely because of the lack of legislation. Now that there is an Archives Act in place, the Department has been given the necessary legislative framework in which to work on implementing a public sector records management programme. The ways and means by which it is proposed that this is to be done will have to be the subject of another article.