Education for Social Transformation

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Records Management in Aid of
Social Transformation in Nigeria

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Abstract

Records constitute a vital tool for decision-making.
Availability of the right information to the right person
at the right time guarantees a well-informed decision
which can impact positively on society. Besides,
records constitute the enduring memory of a nation,
as they document the activities of its people and
institutions. The knowledge of such activities is crucial
to planning and development. Unless records are
properly managed, access will be difficult if not
impossible. This paper, therefore, discusses the basic
process of records management and highlights its
benefits in ensuring access to valuable information
that is required for social transformation.

Introduction

Reflecting on the poor appreciation of the importance of records in
American society, McCain (1953) wrote:

> Despite the fact that one's entry into this world and
> his exit from it are carefully recorded, and despite
> the fact that almost all the important events of his

life in between, such as education, marriage, military service, land ownership, church membership, payment of taxes, voting privileges, social security, insurance, and numerous other items are made a matter of record, millions of Americans have no real appreciation of the value of private and public archives.

McCain's observation is as instructive as it is unfortunate. This situation of lack of appreciation of records is not peculiar to American society, but true of most societies, particularly those in the developing world. If the importance of records is little appreciated, records management is little honoured. Yet, records, through the ages, have played a pivotal role in bringing about social transformation.

Record

The term *'record'* derived its origin from the Latin word *'recordari'* meaning to be mindful of or to remember (Esse, 2000). It refers to recorded information, regardless of form or medium, received and maintained by an agency, institution, organisation or individual in pursuance of its legal obligations or in transaction of business of any kind (Charman, 1990). The Nigerian National Archives Act of 1992 gives a long definition of record. The Act, in section 52, which is the interpretation section, provides that:

> *"records"* means all papers, registers, printed matters, books, maps, plans, photographs, microfilms, cinematographic films, sound recordings, or other documentary materials regardless of physical form or characteristics made or received by public or state offices, or by business houses or companies, private bodies or individuals in pursuance of their legal obligations or in connection with the transaction of their business...

Records can, therefore, be in any format – paper, film, tape or digital. Record keeping is not a monopoly of the modern society as the art has evolved from the early cave painting to the present day digital environment. The art of writing and technology have, however, played a crucial role in bringing about the big transformation witnessed in record keeping.

Records Management

The concept of records management arose in reaction to the problems posed by paper records explosion. In the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK), investigative bodies were set up in 1947 and 1952 respectively, to study the problems and make recommendations for better and more economical control and management of public records.

On April 12, 1948, the Hoover Commission in the USA commissioned a task force under the leadership of Emmett J. Leahy, the Executive Director of the National Records Management Council, to carry out a study of the records management of the Federal Government. The Task Force submitted its report to the Commission on October 14, 1948 and this was in turn presented to the Congress in January 1949 by Mr. H. Hoover, the Chairman of the Commission (Daramola, 2000).

In the UK the report of the Committee on Departmental Records, headed by the Rt. Hon. Sir James Grigg, was presented to the Parliament in 1952. The report of this and other studies played a significant role in establishing the concept of records management.

Although the colonial administration in Nigeria showed interest in the management of the records of its activities in the country, by sending dispatches to its officials on the subject matter beginning with that of 1914, it was not until the early 1950's that the Nigerian Record Office was established through the efforts of Kenneth Dike. By the early 1970's the National Archives (as it was later known) established a records management division. Today, the National

Archives Act grants the institution the power to coordinate the records management programme in Nigeria.

The term *'records management'* refers to a planned programme for the creation, maintenance, retention, transfer and disposition of records. According to Penn, Pennix and Coulson (1994), it is the management of information captured in reproducible form that is required for conducting businesses. The essence of records management is to ensure efficiency and economy in the use of records.

Records Life Cycle

Control of records, from creation to final disposition, which records management entails involves the entire life cycle of records. The life cycle theory likens the entire existence of a record to that of a biological organism which is born, lives and dies (Penn, Pennix and Coulson, 1994). Records are, therefore, created, have active life and are disposed of when they are no longer relevant for the purposes informing their creation. Disposal in records management does not exclusively mean destruction as a change of custody from active storage to inactive or archival storage is also known as records disposal.

The concerns of records management fall into three phases. These are:

1.   Records creation;
2.   Records use and maintenance; and
3.   Records disposition.

Records Creation

This is the first phase of records management. It involves the control of creation of records. If properly and effectively administered, it will prevent the creation of non-essential records, thereby reducing the volume of records to be manipulated, controlled, stored and

disposed of. More importantly, control of records creation reduces the expenses of records generation and maintenance. It also enhances the usability and value of essential records. Besides, it also ensures appropriate utilisation of micrographic and automation throughout the life cycle.

Records creation can be controlled through specific elements like forms design, forms management, correspondence management, reports management, management information systems, directives management, copy reproduction management and word processing.

Records Use and Maintenance

Records use and maintenance stage is the second phase of records management. This phase involves the control, use and storage of records needed to carry out or facilitate the activities of an organisation. It embodies measures to ensure ready availability of needed information and records, cost-effective use of current information and records and selection of supplies, equipment and locations for the storage of records.

Control of records at the use and maintenance phase can be exercised through elements like filing and retrieval systems, files management, mail and telecommunications management and copy machine management.

Records Disposition

Records disposition is the final and critical phase of records management. It is the critical phase in that it is during this phase that decisions are taken as to which records should be kept permanently and how long after their creation records should be retained for on-going administrative or legal reasons.

The processes involved in carrying out an effective disposition programme are:

1.   Identification and description of records by series or class;
2.   Scheduling of these series or classes for retention or disposal;
3.   Appraisal to determine which records merit permanent retention as archives;
4.   Periodic disposal of non-permanent records; and
5.   Transfer of permanent records to the archives.

Basic Elements

The records management programme of controlling the life cycle of records is made possible through certain basic elements which are discussed below.

Records Inventory

This is a complete listing of file contents by category, together with sufficient supporting information to enable a proper evaluation of file function and activity (Daramola, 1992).

A valid decision on retention or disposal of records cannot be taken unless there is reliable information about the character, volume, informational content and the internal relationships of the records. An inventory is, therefore, an indispensable element in records management.

Records Schedule

A records schedule has been defined as a document describing the recurring records of an agency, institution or administrative unit, specifying those records to be preserved as having archival value and authorising on a continuing basis and after the lapse of specified retention periods or the occurrence of specified actions or events, the destruction of the remaining records (Alegbeleye, 1992).

A records schedule deals with records from their creation through their life span. In it, specific instructions are given as to what will happen to the various records of an organisation or department. The values of records are identified before instructions are given as to how long such records should be kept. A schedule has an advantage of giving an effective control to the creation, distribution, use, maintenance and final disposition of records.

Two types of schedule are identifiable, namely, general and specific schedule. In Nigeria, the National Archives Act gives the Director of National Archives the power of drawing up a schedule for public records that are of common category, while a departmental records management officer bears the responsibility for specific schedule for records that are peculiar to his office.

Records Centre

A records centre has been defined as a centralised area for the housing and servicing of inactive or semi-active records whose reference rate does not warrant retention in expensive office equipment. The term *records centre* is more commonly used in the United States and Canada where it is associated with records management practices. In some other countries like Great Britain, it is referred to as *Intermediate Repository* or *Limbo* (Daramola, 1992).

A records centre is an important element of a records management programme. It is designed for the storage of large quantities of records that are relatively inactive, but must be retained, for varying periods of time. In most countries, records in a records centre remain in the legal custody of the transferring agency. As such, access to the records is limited to the staff of such transferring agency.

Benefits of Records Management

The goal of records management can be captured in two words, efficiency and economy. Records management ensures timely

availability of records for decision-making. Many decisions, which would have made tremendous impact on the social life of the people, have either been delayed or made impossible due to absence of records occasioned by poor records management practices.

McCain (1953) observed that:

> Records are necessary and valuable to all of us, because the whole framework of our individual, national, and international relationships is based upon the certain knowledge that the human memory is too fragile to be depended upon for the transaction of business and the orderly conduct of private and public affairs.

With respect to public records, he cited the memorable pronouncement of Ricardo J. Alfaro, a former president of the Republic of Panama, to the Society of American Archivists in 1937, that:

> Public records are the solid ground on which the statesman can tread with security in the incessant toil of conducting the affairs of a nation. They are the silent, impartial, reliable and eternal witness that bears testimony to the toils, the misfortunes, the growth and the glories of peoples.

Records management, therefore, ensures the availability of records for the promotion of patriotism, accountability and good governance thereby engendering social transformation. It ensures continuity in administration and facilitates the protection of the legal rights of the citizenry.

Records management guarantees social justice. Vital information that can establish the rights and obligations of individuals, organisations and institutions is contained in records. A proper management of the records facilitates access and timely availability and utilisation of such information for the sustenance of a just society. Nigeria as a nation has, on several occasions, been faced with the adverse effects of poor records management,

as delays have been witnessed in the justice system for no other reason than absence of relevant records. The economy too has not been spared, as a lot of revenue has been lost to poor records management.

As observed by Mazikana (1999), the biggest access constraint to information embodied in records and archives is not the stipulation of stringent access conditions and regulations, "but simply the poor state in which records are kept, the absence of systems for their proper management, the disorganised manner in which they are stored and the lack of appropriate instruments and tools to facilitate access".

Conclusion

Records play a vital role in the life of any individual, organisation, institution or nation.   They constitute an invaluable memory and a dependable companion to decision-making, information, today, being the fifth factor of production.   Records are essential for social transformation. The extent to which records are accessible for social transformation is, to a very great extent, dependent on   records   management   practices. Unfortunately, most institutions in Nigeria, particularly in the public sector, pay lip service to records management.   It is time, as a nation, to have positive attitude to records management to bring about the much desired social transformation.

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