PROBLEMS OF AND STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING RECORDS MANAGEMENT IN A DEPRESSED ECONOMY: NIGERIA IN FOCUS

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	The problems of records keeping in under developed countries including Nigeria has been a worrisome topic both in government and private institutions. Considering the place of sound record keeping in the different segments of the economy, this study looked at the concept of records, their relevance in organizations/institutions, their benefits and their management. It aimed to find out the problems and propounded strategies for improving records management (as invaluable documents in any organization) in a depressed economy like that of Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

In developing countries like Nigeria, records management is yet to receive and attain the level of attention and support that it has received in developed countries. This is because most developing countries battles with economic depression. A 'depressed economy' is an economy which experiences a prolonged period of recession, or a significant and prolonged downturn in the economy (International Finance Corporation, 2016). According to the Business Dictionary (2017), this is a state of the economy resulting from an extended period of negative economic activity as measured by GDP. It is often described as a more severe form of a recession that leads to extended unemployment, a spike in credit defaults, broad declines in income and production, currency devaluation and a deflationary economy.

Characteristics of an depressed economy include declining business activities, falling prices, rising unemployment, increasing inventories, public fear and panic. In times of depression, consumers' confidence and investments decrease, causing the economy to shut down. In the midst of depressions, businesses still have to survive despite its negative effects on the citizenry. The existence and continuity of businesses and the economy at large in today's world revolve around not just sourcing and using information but good record keeping. The classic example of this occurred in the 1930s, when the Great Depression shook the global economy.

The records of an organization constitute her corporate memory which supplement human memory, serve as a guide for effective planning and decision making. Records are invaluable to any organization. In order to take advantage of past experiences, accurate and good records keeping are the bedrock of planning for the future in an organization. Popoola (2000) stated that information and records management are the bedrock of business activity, if there is no information the management is crippled in its planning and decision making processes.

Proper management of records involves a logical and practical approach to records, conservation, maintenance, preservation, description, use and disposition and these take place in records office; such as registries, records centres, archives etc. The prime source of any civilized human society is the dissemination of information of daily interactions. In specialized settings like universities, financial institutions and government establishments, records generation and its proper dissemination on daily activities are very important. For effective administrative services, there is need for the availability and accessibility of records to the subordinates. This would not only facilitate healthy service, it would prevent undue hardship experience in the establishment. The administrative records can be conceptualized as an extension of an organization's memories. In order words, any information gained at any point in time must be accurately recorded. The availability of such recorded information enhances a quicker, easier and much better administrative work.

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Information, according to Opara (2004) is a critical resource that enables an organization to function and flourish. It is a cornerstone for a long term organizational survival. Davis (1976) stressed that because of the sensitive nature of their work; both administrative and otherwise, an organization cannot afford to toy with gathering accurate information. Information is very crucial for effective running of all organizations. In the word of Ayeri (2000), information whether on paper, magnetic tape, in computer or human brain is a fundamental requisite for ensuring rational and coherent decision making. Records are important in all societies for keeping and transferring information. Any society that has no recorded materials ultimately suffers lack of information. Afolabi (1991) also agreed that records are necessary because they contain all the information vital to the daily operations of organizations, institutions and even individual persons. He further observed that an organization cannot function smoothly and effectively in the absence of documented information.

What are Records?

Records have been defined in the code of British Standard (dealing with records management) as information created, received and maintained as evidence and information by an organization or person in pursuance of legal obligations or in the transaction of business. Records can be in any format. It is applied to all records irrespective of the technology used to create and store them or the type of information they contain. They include therefore not only paper series and digital records management system but business and information systems. Elisha (2000) defined records as official documents of an organization which furnish information on such organization's functions, policies, procedures, operations and other related activities. This definition shows records as the documentary account of daily operations of an organization, which can enhance the effective discharge of its operational services. Ayani (2002) defined records as statement, facts, figure, recorded in form of impression and expression purposely established for remembrance and references. This shows that records can be evidence of events, activities, programmes, facts etc in any form or medium like signed copies of annual reports. Tiamuyi (2000) share the same opinion when he defines records as valuable data or information recorded in a medium for purpose of storages, conveyance or transmission over time and space. Uwaifo (2004) sees records as indispensable tools for planning, decision making and implementation. To Ibrahim (2005), records are means of accounting as well as evidence of events.

Records Management

Records management is about controlling records within a comprehensive regime made up of policies, procedures, systems, processes and behaviours. Together they ensure that reliable evidence of actions and decisions is kept and remain available for reference and use when needed. Smith (2002) sees records management as the systematic control of all records from creative through their processing, distribution, organization, storage and retrieval to the ultimate disposition. Taylor (1996) in Ibrahim (1991) stresses the need for organizations to manage their records in order to facilitate decision making. No organization can rely on memory of its transactions. Evborokhai (1990) was of the view that organization will face serious problems if they allow their records to be mismanaged. He continued that organization should let their records staff know that their success depends on how well the information resources are managed.

Why are records kept?

Records are created to provide information about what happened, what was decided and how to do things. Individuals cannot be expected or relied upon to remember reports on the past policies, discussions, reactions and decision accurately all the time. So apart from their daily work they keep records by updating a register or database, writing a note of a meeting or telephone call or filling a letter or email which ensures that their successors have something to refer to in the future.

Benefits of Records Management

Good records management enjoys the following benefits amongst others. It ensures timely availability of records for decision making. Many decisions which could 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 practice.

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 people.

It ensures the availability of records for the promotion of patriotism, accountability and good governance thereby engendering social transformation and continuity in administration. Records management guarantees social justices. Vital information that can establish the rights and obligations of individuals, organizations and institutions is contained in records.

Problems of Records in the Nigerian scenario

Despite the importance of records in an organization, there are a lot of problems and constraints of records management in Nigeria. Ajewole (2001) stated that the problem of records management is not just with records and information, but with those having interface and interaction with them. One problem of records management has to do with inadequate knowledge of the life cycles of records. Popoola and Oluwole, (2007) posited that Nigerian institutions and administrators are often concerned about the alarming rate of misplacement or loss of vital records and the slow speed at which needed records are retrieved from their storage. A study by Iwhiwhu (2005) revealed that records management programmes or policy on records are not available in Nigerian universities; hence the administration of records is without recourse to the principles of records management. There is no University Records Manual, no records retention and disposition schedule, personnel handling the records are not trained in records management, inadequate facilities for the preservation, storage, and retrieval of records, no filing manual, inadequate computers to manage the volume of records generated and the attitude of administrators towards records and records management constitute the problems of records management in Nigerian universities.

Accurate retrieval and timely availability for use of the required information would reduce common problems of management in the institutions, such as difficulties in finding information needed to take decisions or respond to inquiry.

Management of institutions' records is a new development in Nigeria (Ugwunze (1992) There is need to create awareness of the importance of records management in all institutions. These institutions and organizations generate immense quantity and quality of variety of records in their day to day activities; such that, a lot of files are multiplied in numbers without control over their creation. Problems of storage and retrieval of information on records/files continue to increase because they are still done manually. Electronic storage and retrieval of information and information resources are still being gradually integrated into many institutions' records management systems. A well organized records management programme saves a lot of money for the administration of the organization. Records management helps to control the quality and quantity of information that is created.

The purpose and essence of any record system is to get the right information (from the records) in the right place, in the right order, at the right time, for the right person at the lowest cost. For this fact to be achieved, an integrated record management is needed. (Baje 1998) and Enwere (1992) argues that un-integrated records management programme in Nigeria public service has led to inefficiency in administration and loss or unavailability of vital information needed for decision making.

As records management developed, it has also incorporated principles integral to information science as the means of processing information for optimum accessibility and usability, concerned with the origination, collection, organization, storage and retrieval, interpretation, transaction, transformation and utilization of information. Vakkari & Cronin (1992) stated that such principles are adopted by records managers in seeking to enhance the access and use of records.

Stressing on the use of technology in records management, McDonald (1995) opined that in development of records keeping solutions, it is necessary to understand the evolution that is taking place in the use of technology. The application of information and communication technology to the management of records therefore will go a long way in making such records accessible and usable.

Employee records may be defined as records that contain initial application form, result of physical examination, interviews, test scores, periodical appraisal transfer and promotions. Soveign (1984) opined that some or all the following information may also be included in the employee files - full name, addresses, telephone numbers etc. In many organizations, these things are poorly organized and underutilized despite the vital or important information contained. Emerson (1984) argued that personnel records pose a particular problem because of their bulk, longevity and sensitivity. Professional interactive sessions on archives and records management pay little or no attention to the subject of managing personnel records.

The current trend and future of records management

There has been a paradigm shift from paper record keeping to electronic record keeping. It is important to build good record keeping into new systems. This is the information era and a period when virtually every documentation and record keeping is going electronic. This has implications for record managers and record keepers as individuals, institutions and organizations. As NECCC (2004) put it, the involvement of the records manager in the design of new systems is essential. This will help to ensure that records are identified and methods are used to capture fixed records to provide evidence of an activity. The records manager can help articulate what systems and rules are needed to ensure those records are captured and maintained, how long the records should be kept to meet business and other requirements, how they should be stored, and who should have access to them. One of the major benefits of managing and accessing records as stated by Miles (2011) electronically is that they can be made widely available to the workforce at any geographical location, as a searchable repository for shared knowledge, compliance and litigation support. Ideally, this would take place through a single search and access portal, and, again ideally, the records would be stored under a common classification system, with a single security model and with universal retention policies.

The change in the trend in records management has far reaching implications for less developed economies battling with depression with regards to procuring necessary equipment and facilities required for e-record management.

Keeping records in electronic format facilitates easy and speedy retrieval and processing of information contents of these records. Since knowledge sharing is being advocated by institutions and organizations, use of record management system (RMS) is worthwhile.

The way forward: Strategies for improving records management in Nigeria

One thing is to keep records and another is to ensure that such records kept are of good quality and quantity since such are indispensable in quality decision making for any administrative body. Administrative bodies know that poor and inaccurate information outcome results to poor planning, poor decision making hence doom to such organization. The prospects could be in ways as-:

Recruitment and selection processes - These require the collection of dates, estimating skills and competence, analysis of the cultural contact, attracting candidates and matching people to the job requirement and of the organization. Armstrong (2006) said that recruitment process that is professionally conducted could guarantee best candidate to manage records in an organization better. Poor job analysis, failure to attract competent candidates and selection of competent staff is likely to impact on how records are managed as resources. He further stated that a recruitment policy that embraces advertisement of vacancies, processing all applications with efficiency and courtesy based on qualification allows candidates to air their views and demonstrate their expertise in vital issues.

Reward policies-Reward aimed at equitable fair and consistent payment in organizations are important. According to Aina (2009), compensation is the most critical issue in attracting and keeping talented staff. Next employees may express great commitment to the job and organization when they fell that their capabilities, efforts and performances are recognized and appreciated. He argued that human resources' policies which include recruitment, training, development and rewarding employees would increase commitment that is vital in motivating records staff to manage records efficiently and effectively. He maintained that when recruitment of records' staff has been done proficiently and in the presence of good training and development policies in addition to good rewards, records' staff are likely to manage records better.

Recruitment of a qualified manager - The organization should employ an adequately trained records' manager who should hold a Masters or Doctoral degree in records or archives management and should have at least three years experience in the area of records management. Having a records manager to oversee all records management activities in the institution will help enrich professional leadership that is currently dwindling in the organization.

Good records maintenance culture - An administrator that takes pains to prepare and keep quality records should endeavor to have maintenance culture. Another glaring problem hindering effective management of records in Nigeria is total lack of maintenance culture.

Lobby for additional resources - The head, centre registry and heads of departmental records sections should actively lobby for adequate budgetary support by demonstrating the benefits of records management such as enhancement of efficiency, reduction of cost, litigation support and so on. General support and improvements in the work environment of records' personnel should also be advocated for by the head of the centre records registry.

Training and development is also very important because it enhances staff absorption capacity. Training according to Otito (2008) is a planned process that modifies attitude, knowledge and skills that add value to its resources and help the organization to achieve its purpose. She considered training under induction, orientation and off the job training. She further stated that employee induction involves spending time doing the jobs in each department to understand the flow of the product or services through the organization. It enhances particular skill on the job and will achieve monitoring and coaching by senior staff.

Walala (2010) added that employees who are highly trained and whose carrier development programmes are effectively managed, show high level of commitment; are flexible, multi skilled and capable of making remarkable contributions to the progress of the organizations. Unfortunately some organizations shy away from training because they feel that upgrading the skill of the work force will make them marketable to competitors. Yet training helps employers build more security with their employees and are also likely to work better to improve the image of their organization.

Development of specific records' policies and procedure - The officers in charge of records section in various units of the organization should work together with the head of centre registry to develop policies which should specifically address issues on unique records such as medical, financial, students records etc. The purpose of such policies will be to establish the principles, responsibilities and requirements for the management of those particular records. According to Shaun (2008) this will aid in addressing issues that have not been adequately addressed in records management programme.

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