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NIGERIAN FORUM

A JOURNAL OF OPINION ON WORLD AFFAIRS



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- (b) To provide and maintain means of information upon international questions and promote the study and investigation of international questions by means of conferences, lectures and discussions, and by the preparation and publication of books, reports, or otherwise as may seem desirable so as to develop a body of informed opinions on world affairs.
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PATRON: The President, Federal Republic of Nigeria.

SUPERVISOR: The Vice President, Federal Republic of Nigeria.

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The Significance and Techniques of Record Management Services in an Archival Organization

By
Usman A. Saliu*

Introduction

The growth and development of archive centres in the economically developed nation have been associated with historical research and development, and as such record-handlers and management-initiators were mostly historians. According to Tsadik, record centres were placed where historical archives were collected, sorted, organized, stored and made available to researchers. As a result, these record centres were not directly linked with the day-to-day activities of government agencies. T.R. Schellenberg, defined records as

All books, papers maps, photographs, or other documentary materials, regardless of former

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physical characteristics, made or received by any public or private institution in pursuance of its legal obligations or in connection with the transaction of its proper business and preserved, or appropriate for preservation, by the institution or its legitimate successor as evidence of its functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations or other activities, or because of the information value of the data contained therein.

Records can be categorized into three major groups, textual, cartographic and pictorial. Textual records include letters, reports, diaries, and the like.

Presently, record centres are entrusted with the responsibilities of collecting written documents, various recordings, films, maps, plans, outlines and the like, selecting organizing them, and making them available to researchers and according to set standards. The materials preserved are not only those produced by government agencies, but also by non-government agencies, companies, individuals and families. Records in various formats have been preserved for ages. Archeological findings have shown that organized record keeping existed both in English and Babylonia before 3,000 B.C. In the case of France, it was during its revolution in 1789 that records were accorded utmost importance and their preservation was recognized as essential. The French National Archives, the earliest in the world, was set up in 1790. When we consider the question of records in the developing countries, we see that people are not always certain whether archives should be given priority over other basic needs that these countries are facing or not cultural matters tend to be neglected in favor of other questions. As regards policy

planning and execution, emphasis is too often given to economic, over cultural, factors. Foods, clothing and shelter are given priority. In the same manner governments tend to give top consideration to health and education and other needs before cultural materials.

In an area where the concept of archives and record keeping does not exist, it is rather difficult to know or understand its usefulness. It is because of these and other factors that the developing countries have been late starters in the art of preserving and making records available to users. Records and manuscripts are the basis for the re-construction and interpretation of history. Such historical records include, royal chronicles, lives of Nigerian Religious leaders, mosques, churches and monastic documents. Early libraries and record centres all over the world were associated with temples, government offices, organized businesses and the collection by families of genealogical records. All have played their respective parts in shaping the history of Nigeria.

Definition of Archives

The word "archive," which is of Greek origin, has been defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "a place in which public records or other important historic documents are kept". The English Cassel Archivist Jenkinson, similarly, defined archive as corresponding to the ancient public records with which he was primarily concerned, and evolved principles for their treatment that is relevant applies particularly to such records. It is obvious, therefore that there is no final or ultimate definition of the term "archives" that must be accepted without change and in preference to all others. The definition may be modified in each country to fit its particular needs.

Although archival developments during the decline of the ancient civilizations and the Middle Ages had some influence on the character of archival establishments in the early modern period, it is sufficient for my present purpose to consider modern institutions. The archival profession, though relatively new, is not lacking in scholarly and scientific substance; and contrary to custom it has tried to avoid the development of a specialized terminology.

Objectives of Managing Public Records

The objectives in managing public records is to make the records serve the purposes for which they were created as cheaply and effectively as possible, and to make a proper disposition of them to serve those purposes. Records are efficiently managed if they can be found quickly and without fuss or bother when they are needed, if they are kept at a minimum charge for space and maintenance while they are needed for current business unless they have a continuing value for purposes of research or for other purposes. The objective of efficient record management can be achieved, only if attention is paid to the handling of records from the time they are created until the time when they are released to an archival institution or disposed of.

Principle of Arrangement in Organizing Archival Material

According to Laura Coles, the next step in your archival activities is processing: Organizing each accession following the principles of arrangement, then packing, labeling, and storing the records so that they are under physical control. Unlike library books, which can be classified by subject, given a number, and stored on a shelf in a set order, archival materials contain information about numerous diverse subjects and cannot be physically organized by subject.

Whenever possible, the records in each archival accession are arranged and filed in the order in which they were originally created, maintained, and used, not according to any artificial or arbitrary arrangement. The two most important principles of arrangement are provenance and original order.

Provenance refers to the “office of origin”, or the person or body that created or received the records in the course of business or personal activities. This is sometimes also referred to as respect for the source or creator. Each new accession of records represents a distinct unit, and the relationship of various items in this unit must be maintained. For example, do not divide and interfile the Robinson papers with the Jones papers, regardless of any relationship between the two families. Do not interfile the official records of the hospital board of directors with the personal papers of Dr. Joseph Hanson, even though he had been a member of the board. Each medium, such as maps or photographs, may have its own storage requirements, but you ought to be able to identify all the items in each unit and bring them all back together whenever necessary.

Original order second rule of archival arrangement is to preserve or recreate original order: the order and organization in which the documents were created and/or stored by the creator or office of origin. If a corporate director files documents according to the various departments in the organization, you need to maintain or reconstruct that departmental organization. If Mr. Adams family’s documents are sorted into personal correspondence, family photographs, and business records then that is the order in which to keep the materials. Original order is most evident in corporate, institutional, or government records, where organization and ease of retrieval were important factors in their creation and use. Private manuscripts and papers, on the other hand, often

show little discernible original order. Items may have been kept in a cupboard or in a box in the basement; their creator may have found a filing system unnecessary.

As a result, original order cannot be as inflexible a rule as provenance. While record management is thus concerned with the whole life span of most records, it strives to limit their creation, and for this reason one finds “birth control” advocates in the record management field as well as in the field of human genetics. It exercises a partial control over their current use. And it assists in determining which of them should be consigned to the “hell” of the incinerator or the “heaven” of an archival institution, or if per chance, they should first be held for a time in the purgatory” or “limbo” of a record centre.

Archive Records Management

According to Michael Cook, not all archives services carry out a records management programme, though in principle most would have the possibility of introducing one to cover the records created by their governing authority. Where an archive service has the primary duty of serving an employing authority or institution, the records management aspect is of major importance, and affects all the processes which come after it. Records management can also be considered as a function exercised independently of archival management, but the two logically go together and either may suffer from the absence of the other.

Records management is a field which has attracted increasing attention in recent times. The growing sophistication of administrative practices and the increasing complexity of organizations, together with the enormous expansion of the quantity of records produced, has made it

necessary to introduce conscious management into this area and to develop it as a set of techniques or discipline.

Historically, interest in records management has arisen from different points of origin. In some cases the initiative has come from archivist, whose main concern is the control of material passing out of current record systems into archival care. Records management in this tradition is concerned mainly with retirement of records from currency and their appraisal. In other cases the initiative has come from organization and methods or management advisory units, whose main concern has been the reduction of administrative costs. In other cases, again the records management system may have originated in central secretariat departments, whose main concern has been to regulate the flow of information and documentary media within the central offices. There may also be cases where records management has begun with legal advisers, whose concern has been to preserve and retrieve official documents. Finance departments have also had to develop systems to serve the needs of audit.

The historical point of origin impresses its character on the resulting programme and it may determine where the main thrust of management effort is placed. The present study takes as its starting point the view that records management is a branch of information management. The quality of the information it supplies is the main criterion for on record management programme, and this information supply is radically affected by its relationship with an archives service.

To Allen Kent, records management is a field of management whose material is the data, media, and systems used in the record-making and record storing processes in any organization. Its aim is to achieve the best retrieval and exploitation of the data held in these media and systems, and

incidentally to reduce the cost and improve the efficiency of record making and keeping processes.

Principles and Techniques of Archives Management

Frank Evans, states that public records are the grist of the archivist's mill. The quality of this grist is determined by the way records are produced and maintained while in current use, and by the way records are disposed of. The adequacy of documentation on any matter-whether it be governmental policy or planning, or the social or economic problems that are the objectives of this policy or planning depends on how the records are made and kept for current use; and the disposition that is made of the offer that use has been exhausted. The archivist's judgments on values, of course, have a bearing on how a complete documentation is preserved on any particular matter, but the way records are kept for current use determines how accurately record value can be assessed. It also determines how easily the valuable records can be segregated for retention in an archival institution. The usability of records for research purposes also depends on how they were originally arranged.

Archival methods, moreover, are developed to a large degree, in relation to current record management practices. It is perhaps sufficient to note at this point that all of the archivist's problems in arranging, describing, appraising, and servicing public records arise out of the way in which such records are handled in government offices. The principles and practices that have been evolved in public records management, vary from one country to another, the principles and practices of the archival profession also vary; and literature of a particular country describing such principles and practices is frequently unintelligible to archivists of other countries unless the conditions under which the public records

have been currently maintained are fully understood. Practically all statements of the principles governing archival arrangement, for example, have been developed by archivists in relation to the particular ways public records were arranged in their respective governments.

Significance of Record Management

According to T.R. Schellenberg, the most important aspect of record management relates to the use of records for the conduct of governmental operations. Little is done within government that is not made a matter of record. Both the top level administrators, who are concerned with routine transactions, need record in their work. The kind of records needed by two may be different but records are as important as at the bottom of the administrative ladder. At the top, records provide both stimulus and background information for executive decisions. On every problem that is considered documents will be assembled from many sources and of many types-correspondence, memoranda, and the like in which the problem is initially stated; statistical tabulations and analyses, performance and accomplishment reports, narrative reports and the like that contain the information needed for making decisions; circulars, memoranda and other procedural and policy directives that serve as means of administrative control, selected records, of past actions that serve a precedent giving consistency to the processes of government.

As a rule, the most valuable records are those that pertain to the origins, the organizational and functional developments, and the major programs of an agency. They relate to the direction rather than to the execution of government functions. They are often not so complete as records on unimportant matters. It is a curious anomaly that the more important a matter, the less likely is a complete

document of it to be found. While modern technology has aided the making and keeping of records in many ways, it has also made unnecessary the production of many documents that once would have become part of the record of government action. Much that influences the development of policies and programs never makes its way into formal records.

Important records are difficult to classify for current use. Policy records cannot always be identified as such when they are first created. Policies arise in respect to particular transactions, and so the records pertaining to them may be interfiled with others of no lasting moment on the transactions with which they were initially associated. Records on policy and procedural matters - on general as distinct from specific matters - are difficult to assemble, to organize into recognized file units, and to identify in such way that their significance will be made known. Records of routine operations, on the other hand, are easily classified.

Important records are difficult to retire after their current uses have been exhausted. Important records on policy and procedure do not become obsolete, or non-current, as soon as the transactions in connection. And even if those policies and procedures are superseded, the records of them serve to explain and give meaning to the change. Such records are thus difficult to retire because the period of their administrative utility is difficult to establish. Records evidencing only the execution of policies and procedures, on the other hand, become non-current when all likely action in the particular case has been taken. The termination of routine action is usually defined and clear. Important records, moreover, are difficult to assemble for preservation in an archival institution because many of them may have been submerged. And this segregation commonly has to be made

after the records have lost their significance for current operations and their identity has become obscured.

Record Management in an Archival Organization

According to T.R. Schellenberg, the efficient management of public records is of major importance to government, and a government's efficiency can often be measured by the efficiency with which its records are managed. Public officials, even at the top level of administration, have a stake in record management, for every refinement in record management has its influence on functioning.

Record management activities are of a highly specialized type, requiring specialized competencies and specialized background of experience. In every large and complicated government, therefore, a special staff should exist somewhere in its administrative hierarchy to concern itself exclusively with providing leadership for all agencies in their handling of record problems. The placement of such a staff in a governmental structure, its size, and the character of its activities are determined by the size, complexity, and organization of the government it serves. Whenever possible the specialized staff should be attached to a staff agency, which is one that has jurisdiction in certain matters over all other agencies of the government. The matters usually embrace budgetary, personnel, and facilitative operations, such as the procurement of supplies and the provision of space.

Control measures for Records Production

In assessing the efficacy of various measures taken to control the production of records, it is important to place things in proper perspective. Paper work management by and large,

is concerned with the mechanics, not with substance of government operations.

While great things can be accomplished by simplifying paper work, many improvements in government operations may be attributed as much to the simplifying of work processes as to the simplification of paper work. The remedies proposed for improving the management of paper work, moreover, are often inadequate, going no further than vague and indefinite references to the adoption of standards and controls or, the use of tested methods and practices for making and keeping records. Inefficient paper work is often a symptom of improper administration. Such ills cannot be cured by improvements on paper work management alone. The ills lie deeper and the cure for many record problems lies in improving the work processes, and more generally, the organization and functioning of government.

Conclusion

Having discussed and assessed the significance and techniques of record management services in an archival organization, it has been firmly established that archival records remain the tool for record making and keeping an archival organization while it is suggested that record keeping and making should henceforth be strongly improved upon and be updated with systemic modern technology to further the course of knowledge and learning advancement if learning remains stoutly the Boston of knowledge often drawn from the past to beauty the present. Archival organization should remain significant.