

**The Management of Public Sector Records
Disposition Programme in Ghana**

Dr Pino Akotia

Department of Information Studies

University of Ghana, Legon

pinoakotia@yahoo.com

and

Mrs. Agnes Emefa Balasu

National Board for Professional & Technical Examinations

Box SD 109, Accra

Emefa.balasu@yahoo.com

Abstract

An efficient and structured records disposition programme has several benefits to records management. Records disposition refer to the actions that are associated with implementing decisions about retention or destruction of records. It also includes migration and transfer of records to new storage locations, custodians or owners. In Ghana, PRAAD is the lead agency for records and archives management and by law has government-wide remit for the records disposition programme, a responsibility that includes controlled disposition of public records with the collaboration of public agencies and the consistent development and application of disposition procedures, standards and best practice.

Questionnaire, interview and observation were used for data collection. Two sets of respondents were selected. The first set was made up of Chief Directors (bureaucratic heads of ministries) and their records office heads in the 24 ministries in Ghana. The second set comprised the top management of PRAAD, sampled purposively.

The study revealed out that since 2000 the disposition programme has lacked focus as a result of a weak programme infrastructure. The holdings of the National Records Centre are in excess of storage capacity and the archives repositories are all full. Storage facilities in the public agencies (MDAs) are poor and it was evident PRAAD had no acquisition policy to inform its documentation goals. The effective creation, use and preservation of records are integral components of good governance. PRAAD must as a result ensure that related records infrastructure is complete and consistently implemented. Programme structure and ownership must similarly be strengthened.

Keywords

Records disposition programme, PRAAD, public agencies, Ghana, retention controls.

Introduction

As a fundamental activity of public administration, record keeping has immense benefits to public sector management. Public records represent a critical resource in public management. They provide a reliable, legally verifiable source of evidence of decisions and document compliance or non-compliance with rules and procedures.

The degree to which public management activities are performed depends in part, on the underlying records infrastructure. Where the infrastructure is strong and effective the records management system is underpinned by policy and programmes on records disposition. Records disposition refer to the actions that are associated with implementing decisions about the retention or destruction of records. It also includes migration and transfer of records to new storage locations, custodians or owners (AS 4390, 1-, 1996).

Besides supporting accountability and defense against litigation, efficient disposition systems promote effective records retrieval, help to avoid inadvertent destruction and eliminate cost of storing and maintaining unwanted records. From an archives perspective, the programme protects quality and integrity of future archival accessions.

The Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD) is the central service agency with statutory responsibility for the lifecycle management of public records in Ghana. It ensures the value of public records is systematically evaluated and that their transfer or destruction is authorized. PRAAD's establishment law, Act 535 of 1997 provides that it ensures the timely and systematic disposition of all public records in collaboration with public agencies, set and consistently apply standards and good practice procedures for the disposition programme. The objective of these provisions is to promote a continuum of care for public records in support of good governance, accountability and efficiency.

Until 1997, the remit of the National Archives of Ghana, (as PRAAD was then known) was restricted to the management of the inactive phase of the records life cycle. A purely cultural institution, it had no institutional mandate to provide leadership in the management of earlier phases of the life cycle. Without an interface between the active and inactive phases the entire public sector was left without a credible watchdog over its evidence base. The National Archives itself was operating without a coherent management system or modern professional procedures. (Akotia, 1997).

There was a paradigm shift in 1997 which included the strengthening of the infrastructure for records management. This shift signaled a recognition for an unbroken chain of urgent and professional responsibility for a continuum of care of public records. The reform introduced a unified vision and a National Archives with a greatly strengthened technical and institutional capacity in the form of PRAAD.

Objectives of the Study

It is thirteen or so years since the Ghana Records Management Improvement Programme came to an end. The programme to restructure government records systems was not only timely but

strategic. The study examined the record keeping requirements and disposition programme infrastructure and practices thirteen years after the reform initiatives. It evaluated PRAADs records disposition programme mandate, tools and capacity including the disposition programme practices, standards and procedures. It also examined the knowledge and skills of personnel as well as the state and capacity of the National Records Centre. The study demonstrates that a comprehensive disposal programme, effectively implemented, translates into realizable cost savings and improvements in records programme and efficiency in government.

Methodology

This study relied on the case study method and the case investigated was PRAAD, the lead agency in Ghana in records and archives management. It is the public agency mandated by law to oversee government-wide records disposition programme. Three methods of data collection used in the study were questionnaire, interview and observation. Two sets of respondents were selected. The first comprised all the Chief Directors and their records office heads in the 24 ministries in Ghana numbering 48 (100%). The second, the top management of PRAAD, sampled purposively constituted a sample size of 5 (8.5%) of the total population of PRAAD.

Two sets of questionnaires were used to solicit information from the Chief Directors (Permanent Secretaries) and Records Officers (Registries) of the 24 ministries. The second set of respondents comprised the Director of PRAAD and his two deputies, the Head of the National Records Centre and deputy who were interviewed enabling researchers to obtain a global picture on records disposition policies and programme. Observation provided data on records systems practices and procedures.

Table 1: Breakdown of the target population

Institution	Designation	Target Population	Sample Population
Ministries	Chief Directors	24	24
	Heads of Records Offices	24	24
PRAAD	Director and staff of PRAAD	59	5
Total		107	53

Findings and Discussion

The findings were based on responses drawn from the respondents and on observation. Forty-one (41) respondents representing 77.4% out of 53 sampled population responded to the questionnaires and interview for the study. Of the forty-one, 22 Records Officers and 15 Chief Directors responded to the questionnaires. All the 5 top managers from PRAAD were interviewed.

Records Office staff and Records Disposition

Records Office staff are responsible for applying records management principles and techniques to the systematic handling and control of correspondence and internally generated documents. Records management requires specific skills and knowledge necessary for managing recorded information as a defining resource.

Twenty-one records officers (95.5%) confirmed they have been trained in records management. Of this number, 17 (77.3%) had in-service training, 3 (13%) had their training from a Diploma awarding institution and one (4.5%) had his by undergraduate degree studies.

The records infrastructure provides mandate, direction, responsibility, tools and capacity to create, use and preserve information and records effectively. In spite of this awareness, the emerging picture was one of serious gaps and weaknesses in the records related infrastructure of government. Evidently, there are no clear policies and direction for documenting business transactions, protecting privacy or providing public access. There is very little in the form of policies which provide authority and overall direction and aspects of the infrastructure ownership and accountability. Space and budgetary allocations for records work is limited suggesting an organizational culture that may not value the benefits of good record keeping or be concerned about its absence.

The concept of the records centre is one of the key features of a structured records management programme. In Ghana, the National Records Centre has capacity to hold all records transferred from central government institutions including records in specialized medium and provides a dependable retrieval service. Only 9 (41%) of the respondents indicated their ministries transfer records to the National Records Centre every two years, one (4.5%) annually. Five (23%) explained there was no transfer and had never sent records for records storage.

Similarly, findings on electronic records management revealed a weak underlying infrastructure across government. The infrastructure is unable to protect the integrity and evidentiary value of electronic records and data as they move across ministries, networks, applications and media. Managing electronic records has its challenges. Electronic information systems are complex and the electronic records fragile (Lipchak, 2002). Even so out of 22 respondents, only 6 (27.3%) said they were aware of up-to-date disposal authorities on electronic records. Sixteen ministries (72.7%) have neither seen disposal schedules for electronic records nor procedures for the disposition of electronic records.

A procedures manual for records disposition is a reference, training and accountability tool. It covers procedures and standards. It assigns responsibility and derives authority from the records and archives law. An overwhelming 19 ministries (86.4%) indicated they have a manual on records disposition with only 3 (13.6%) responding their ministries did not consistently apply the procedures. These 3(13.6%) were routinely engaged in disposition activities unaware of standards and procedural requirements.

The Civil Service Leadership and Records Disposition

Respondents in this category constitute the leadership of the Ghana Civil Service. Designated as Chief Directors they are the bureaucratic heads of ministries who assist ministers in policy development and implementation of programmes. Without exception, respondents (100%) affirmed the existence of a healthy records infrastructure in their ministries. In spite of this 4(26.7%) conceded they were unaware of any policy on records disposition. The remaining 11 (73.3%) maintained there was a policy and an efficient disposal programme.

On the transfers of ministry records for records centre storage, one respondent pointed out that his ministry records system was clogged, while another explained no transfers had been made for a long time. Nine (60%) said it takes more than 5 years for any transfers to be made. One of the respondents explained his ministry does not transfer its records for reasons of confidentiality.

The Chief Directors (100%) claimed that in line with the PRAAD establishment law (ACT 535 of 1997) they cooperate with the Director of PRAAD in respect of records disposition. Yet only one (6.7%) respondent said his ministry had developed an Agency-specific Disposition Schedule. The remaining respondents (93.3%) were either unaware this is a requirement of Act 535 or simply ignored the need for it. While 14 (53.3%) said they have no standards and procedures for records disposition, one (6.7%) said his ministry has standards which are complied with.

Respondents (100%) affirmed the importance of records care and the knowledge and skills required. In this direction, personnel in the records class undergo refresher courses and in the case of 3 ministries (20%) motivational packages are given out as incentives.

The National Records Centre and Records Disposition

According to the Head of the National Records Centre, the centre is holding 100,000 boxes, that is 20,000 boxes in excess of its 80,000 capacity. She explained the Centre has an elaborate programme for meeting retention requirements. With the assistance of a Records Disposition Manual and an Operations Manual, Records Centre staff, she further explained, follow best practice.

Inadequacy of resources for the Centre has been a significant challenge. Specifically, the Head of the Centre complained of the absence of tools and equipment with which to carry out scheduling and disposal practices. In particular, the absence of adequately trained teams of records centre staff was a significant handicap. The staff strength of the Centre with a national remit is two professionals and six support staff. Without the benefit of trained staff, the Centre is often unable to bring the universe of semi-current records under control. Similarly, because of the broad knowledge and analytical skills required to form appraisal judgement, the disposition programme lacks focus. Her challenge is to build staff expertise in the most efficient manner.

The National Records Centre is an essential component of the network of institutions under PRAAD. Its capacity to hold 80,000 boxes provides storage space adequate to prevent proliferation of repositories and ensure uniformity in standards. The facility standards are satisfactory; the structure is simple in style and functional in arrangement. It is a permanent type construction and the site, of sufficient size that includes space for paved parking and vehicle maneuvering.

At the time of the study, the repositories of the National Archives were reportedly full and the Records Centre could not transfer records to archival custody. In the same vein, the Records Centre cannot receive records from MDA's because it is also full. It is an irony that after just thirteen or so years after restructuring of government records systems in Ghana, the National Archives must find itself exactly in the position it was on the eve of reforms in 1991. The underlying reform philosophy at the time was that public records should be logically organized at the point of creation within a system that allowed disposal decisions to be made at each phase of the record life cycle as appropriate. Disposal plans, standards and procedures were developed. The life cycle concept, on the strength of the establishment law became the framework for records control with inventorying and scheduling as tools (Rep. of Ghana, 1997).

PRAAD and the Records Disposition Programme

The directors of PRAAD confirmed staff had adequate knowledge and skills in managing the records disposition programme. Even so, the directors had different views on the key players in records disposition and their competencies. It was admitted however that the overall PRAAD training schedule was inadequate.

To a question on PRAAD's acquisition policy which must provide the foundation for the selection process, one of the directors responded PRAAD did not have such a policy. The other directors said there is a policy which directs the selection function, explaining this was the PRAAD's law. Without the conceptual framework provided by an acquisition policy, PRAAD's selection decisions will at best be rote or capricious (Ham, 1993). An institutional acquisition policy sets out the documentation goals and objectives of the archival programme. It guides an archival establishment in building its holdings and provides guidelines against which to measure appraisal decisions. As pointed out by Ham (1993) an acquisition policy is the ethical foundation of the acquisition programme.

The directors of PRADD admitted the absence of the mechanisms for evaluating new accessions. Similarly, it has not been able to set appropriate measurable acquisition targets. Although there was, as intimated by the directors, a records disposition programme infrastructure, it was weak. The essential elements of such an infrastructure including authority, programme structure, operational direction, tools and capacity were far from effective. While responsibility for managing the programme is fragmented, there is no consistent programme structure.

Two of the directors failed to respond to the question on the procedures for documenting and reviewing appraisal decisions. Concern about the finality and future reaction to retention decisions has led to the practice of developing procedures for review of appraisal decisions. The

director who responded to the question explained that there was a policy for the systematic and continuing procedures to evaluate past appraisal decisions but as a result of conditions he described as unfavorable, this policy and procedures under it were no longer in practice.

Indeed, in the absence of reports on disposition recommendations it is impossible to validate the claim of one of the directors that volumes of records in PRAAD repositories have no archival value. Would PRAAD accept the challenge to reevaluate past acquisition decisions in order to address present difficulties? As Dowler (1984) noted “deaccessioning is in a legitimate function of appraisal” and “an essential part of collection development”.

Records Disposition Programme Management Challenges

Until the Records Management Improvement Programme in Ghana, which began in the early 1990s, no serious attention was given to the record life cycle management of public records. With no system in place to link registries to the National Archives and to ensure a link between the management of administrative records and historical records, the national records management infrastructure was in disarray. It was becoming evident the corporate memory of government and the collective memory of society was at the brink.

The restructuring of the National Archives into PRAAD and the recognition given to the life cycle as the framework for records control represented a fundamental paradigm shift. Through the reform programme, the Government had recognized the need for an unbroken chain of management and professional responsibility for the care of records from creation to disposition. Yet, this study demonstrates that thirteen or so years after the reforms this vision is at the verge of collapse.

Records disposition is a critical programme element in a records management programme. The gaps and weaknesses in disposition practices and infrastructure pose challenges that must be addressed to avoid negative programme impacts and risks.

While the PRAAD Act (Act 535) requires the timely and systematic disposition of all public records and charges PRAAD with the responsibility of managing the processes, in practice this remit is far from being achieved. Public agencies, the study reveals, are unable to support PRAAD in its disposition plans. The absence of retention control and guidance materials, have not helped matters. In addition to Act 535, control systems are dependent on policies, procedures, guidelines and best practice which for inexplicable reasons are non-existent.

Findings demonstrate that both the National Records Centre and the National Archives repositories are all full. The Centre is currently holding 20,000 boxes in excess of its capacity, an indication the record life cycle is not being managed and the “three ages” model prescribed by Act 535 ignored. Best practice requires a return to the life cycle management principle which is the framework of records control.

The National Archives repositories hold fragmentary and redundant materials. Some of the holdings have infact never been appraised. Why should records be allowed shelf space and when the directors admit they will not pass an appraisal test? Thus, the National Archives

should reappraise all holdings in order to correct flawed appraisal decisions of the past or change those that are no longer valid (Ham, 1993).

According to Lusthans (1999), an organization performs because it must carry through activities to achieve its mission. Meeting the objectives of corporate mission involves primarily skilled human resource. The findings of this study point out that PRAAD is afflicted by a severe skills and knowledge deficit in its human resource base affecting effectiveness and efficiency. Obtaining approval to hire or replace personnel is far from easy, yet the public expects of PRAAD to deliver on its mission. PRAAD, whose remit is nation-wide has a staff strength of 59 of whom 14 are professionals.

In order for personnel to carry out their responsibilities effectively, they should possess certain basic competencies. Besides formal training programmes, PRAAD will benefit from internal training schemes, often described as repository –specific knowledge and skills. An adequate budget will enable the disposition and other programmes to operate effectively. Similarly, medium and long term planning will enable programme growth that ensures facilities and personnel match the needs of PRAAD and allow for growth over time.

Motivation is key to the success of any organization. The important role of human motivation cannot be over emphasized in the light of proven positive relationships between motivation and performance. Throughout the study, it was evident personnel were not well motivated. The directors lamented the inability to attract and retain competent personnel. PRAAD must be made attractive through among others, a good conditions and scheme of service package.

Conclusion

Inspite of government's recognition that records management is a fundamental element of public sector reform and defining factor in the efficiency of the public sector, this study demonstrates a serious lack of appreciation of the strategic objectives for managing records. Underlying the challenges in the records life cycle management is the disregard for the roles and relationships that ought to exist between the Civil Service Leadership, agency records personnel and PRAAD. Not much thought is given to the role each of the major stakeholders have in managing the records disposition programme.

The study confirms serious gaps and weaknesses in disposition programme management across government. PRAAD is the lead records management agency of the Government of Ghana and records disposition, a shared function between PRAAD, heads of MDAs and records offices. These stakeholders are unable to support the records disposition agenda and culture of implementing disposition related standards. The consequences to government and society is the neglect of corporate memory of government and the society. It leaves society with little shared knowledge of their collective experience, achievements and culture. As a control function, the management of the disposition programme is indicative of the control of the

record at its point of creation or receipt. The study concludes that the loss of control over records disposition is a symptom of a failure to manage records effectively. The implications to evidence and governance are the negative impacts on public policy, the management of programmes and services, reduced accountability and transparency, the loss of the collective memory of society and duplicating so often, the failures of the past

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