

# A FRAMEWORK FOR A RECORDS MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME: LESSONS FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF COOPERATIVE GOVERNANCE AND TRADITIONAL AFFAIRS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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## ABSTRACT

An effective and efficient records management programme is essential for the governance of any organisation. The control functions it exercises can make a vital contribution to the achievement of business objectives and administrative efficiency. However, there is consensus among researchers that many organisations struggle to develop records management programmes to meet business needs. Developing a records management programme is a highly complex and difficult task, to the extent that it is common for records management projects to exceed scheduled completion dates or not be completed at all. This article reports on the findings of an MINF research project (Ngoepe 2008) conducted at Unisa that sought to examine the principles involved in establishing a records management programme with specific reference to the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) in South Africa. Data were collected through online questionnaires, observation and interviews with a selected sample of people and analysed using open source software. The findings suggest that the commitment and support of top management are of enormous value in the implementation of a records management programme. The authors surmise that a records management programme will function effectively only if it is developed in the context

of the larger managerial environment, so that records management procedures reflect overall management objectives. Furthermore, the establishment of an effective records management programme is reliant on an understanding by public servants at all levels of the importance of records and the need for records management infrastructure, that is, policies, strategies, procedures, filing systems, and so on. A further study to investigate records management models in the public sector is recommended.

## KEYWORDS

Records management programme, records management system, government department, public sector, South Africa, Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

An effective and efficient records management programme is essential for the governance of the public sector (Ngoepe & Van der Walt 2009:116). The control functions it exercises can make a vital contribution to the achievement of business objectives and administrative efficiency. The International Records Management Trust (IRMT) (1999a:50) posits that “in cases where records systems break down or are non-existent, there are major consequences for governments and citizens, e.g. officials are forced to take decisions on an ad-hoc basis without the benefit of an institutional memory, citizens cannot claim or protect their rights and the nation’s collective memory is impaired”. According to Metrofile (2010), one of today’s challenges is to ensure that from the mass of data and information created in paper and electronic form, reliable evidence of business transactions is captured, made accessible and disposed of effectively when no longer required. This entails developing and implementing a records management programme to manage records from creation to disposal. The benefits derived from such a programme include economy and improved efficiency through ready access to complete and accurate information, avoidance of unnecessary costs for records storage, protection of rights, and the assurance of continuity of operations. Despite these benefits offered by a records management programme, there is consensus among researchers such as Chachage and Ngulube (2006), Mnjama (2004:6), Ngoepe and Van der Walt (2009:116), Ngulube (2003:18) and Venter (2007:24) that many organisations struggle to develop records management programmes to meet business needs. An effective records management programme requires a clear definition of objectives, responsibilities, and authorities; sufficient resources to administer the programme; continuing training for staff; and regular internal evaluations to monitor compliance and programme effectiveness (IRMT 1999a:50).

In view of the above, this article examines the principles involved in establishing a records management programme with specific reference to the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) in South Africa. Data were collected through online questionnaires, observation and interviews with a selected

sample of people, and analysed through open source software. The findings suggest that the commitment and support of top management are of enormous value in the implementation of a records management programme. The article concludes by arguing that a records management programme will function effectively only if it is developed as part of the larger managerial environment, so that records management procedures reflect overall management objectives.

## **2 BACKGROUND TO THE DEPARTMENT OF COOPERATIVE GOVERNANCE AND TRADITIONAL AFFAIRS**

### **2.1 BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DEPARTMENT**

The COGTA has evolved from a small unit established in the Office of the Presidency in the early 1980s. South Africa during the early 1980s was characterised by political unrest, and it became apparent that the country was heading towards a crisis of unmanageable proportions. The international community, boycotts, as well as movements such as the United Democratic Front (UDF), African National Congress (ANC) and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) were putting political pressure on the then government. In response to this pressure the government formed a unit referred to as a “think tank” in the Office of the Presidency to negotiate with the liberation movements (Republic of South Africa 1985:166). As a result, the first exploratory discussions began between the liberation movements and the unit in the Office of Presidency.

In 1984, the Republic of South Africa Constitution Act 110 of 1983 was implemented. Given the task of implementing the 1983 Constitution, the unit amalgamated with a number of chief directorates from various state departments to become the Department of Constitutional Development and Planning (Republic of South Africa 1985:166). In 1991, the department was officially renamed the Constitutional Development Services (CDS) (Republic of South Africa 1991:40), and given the task of rendering an administrative, planning and advisory support service to the negotiation process in South Africa. To this end, staff members were required to provide secretarial, logistical and administrative support to the activities of the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) (Republic of South Africa 1994:118), a forum for the negotiations for the end of the apartheid system in South Africa. CODESA took place against a backdrop of political violence, including allegations that a state-sponsored third force was intent on destabilising the country. It comprised 18 delegations representing the full spectrum of South African politics, as well as observers from the United Nations, the Commonwealth, the European Union and the Organisation of African Unity (Mandela 1994:108). In 1993 the negotiation process culminated in a historical session of Parliament, at which the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 200 of

1993 was tabled on 17 December 1993 (DPLG 2004:15). In 1994 the name of the CDS was changed yet again, and it became known as the Department of Constitutional Development. Its focus was redefined to include the management of the implementation of a democratic constitutional dispensation for all spheres of government in South Africa (DPLG 2004:16). It thus assumed overall responsibility for the implementation of the (interim) Constitution of 1993, which came into operation on 27 April 1994. With effect from 1 July 1994, the functions of the Department of Constitutional Affairs were extended to include intergovernmental relations, provincial government, local government and traditional authorities. In 1996, the key focus was on supporting the development, finalisation and promotion of the new Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996 (DPLG 2004:16).

During the second term of democratic government in 1999 the department underwent a further name change, and assumed new functions. The constitutional development function was transferred to the Department of Justice, and the Department of Constitutional Affairs was renamed the Department of Provincial and Local Government (DPLG 2004:19). Consequently, the role of this department shifted from that of custodian of the Constitution to the establishment of the new system of provincial and local government. After the 2009 election, the name of the department was changed yet again, and it became the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs. It is clear that under various names and guises, the department has played a leading role in the establishment of a new constitutional order.

## **2.2 A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF HISTORICAL TRENDS IN RECORDS MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN THE COGTA**

In many government departments in South Africa, including the COGTA, proper records management programmes were common before 1994, operating as a partially centralised registry, often with a well-trained and experienced registry staff component. Senior public servants had an understanding of the importance of records management (NARS 2003). In this environment, records were well kept because records management requirements were known and observed. Furthermore, the quality of registry staff was relatively high (NARS 2003). This was the norm across government departments in South Africa. As in other government departments, however, at the COGTA this situation deteriorated progressively in the years following democracy. Informal practices replaced the formal way of managing records, and registries were no longer taken seriously. While the public service expanded steadily, bringing with it a corresponding increase in the flow of paper, the more formal ways of working gradually collapsed. Typically, a departmental culture developed that made little use of records of the previous apartheid government for reference purposes. According to the previous records manager, Vosloo (2007), as in other government departments, there was no real incentive at the COGTA to maintain an effective record-keeping system or to allocate adequate resources for records storage and staff.

Eventually, people who were deemed ineffective or disruptive in other units were relegated to the registry as a form of punishment. For example, in 2003, when a process of restructuring was introduced in the department, one security officer and two cleaners who could not be placed anywhere else were relegated to the registry (Vosloo 2007). This was due to the fact that records management was considered one of the lowliest of administrative functions. The ranks were decimated, even as new and complex electronic information systems were overwhelming the department.

As a result, records management systems collapsed because registry clerks did not have the authority to formulate and implement overall records policies enforceable on staff at all levels. People working in the department's registry had limited training or experience in record-keeping work. This led to a decline in attention to the structure and management of current records and respect for recordkeeping in general. Records classification designed to meet the record-keeping requirements of the apartheid government became unwieldy and ultimately unmanageable. However, despite the low usage of records, there was an extreme reluctance to destroy them, even after they ceased to have any value to the department (Vosloo 2007). This is evident from the mass of records that the department inherited from the previous dispensation. As Vosloo has noted, from 1994 the department's registry existed only to provide messenger, courier and postal services. It became apparent that the change from the old to the new dispensation had resulted in a new workforce that was unaware of proper records management practices.

During the 2003–04 financial year, the department conducted business process mapping in order to align its organisational structure with its strategic plan. This process resulted in restructuring, which culminated in an increase in the number of staff in the department and the creation of new branches such as the Urban Renewal Programme (URB), Free Basic Services (FBS), and Local Economic Development (LED). This far-reaching restructuring process had an impact on the information needs of the department, and, as explained by the IRMT (1999b:40–41), the following symptoms of failure to manage records manifested:

- Loss of control over the creation and use of records;
- Loss of access;
- Fragmentation of official records;
- Existence of different versions of the same information and the absence of authentic records;
- Loss of contextual information, such as the originator and the date of creation.

The newly restructured department subsequently had to accommodate the needs of all its functions in the record-keeping system, and to revive the deteriorating system, and in consequence realised and acknowledged the value of records management in its normal operations. Greater effort regarding records management was made in 2004 following the completion of the restructuring process. For the first time, qualified

records management professionals were appointed, with the mission of establishing a fully-fledged registry providing an efficient records management service to the whole department.

On 2 April 2004, the department appointed a service provider to develop a records management programme for the newly structured department (COGTA File reference number 2/2/2/2). A formal quotation was developed in consultation with the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa (NARS). The specification of the formal quotation covered the following:

- Studying (understanding) the structure and functions of the department;
- Studying (understanding) the business processes of the department;
- Consulting with branch heads, chief directors, directors and staff involved in generating and receiving records;
- Consulting with the NARS;
- Developing classification systems, i.e. file plan and records control schedule;
- Obtaining disposal authority regarding all the records of the department to allow the organisation to allocate proper retention periods to all its records, to enable it to comply with the requirements of accountability and transparency;
- Developing a records management policy and procedure manual;
- Developing an implementation plan and providing after-service support during the implementation process.

After a thorough evaluation and a number of consultations with all stakeholders, AIMS (a records management consultancy) was appointed to develop the records management programme for the department. On 1 December 2004, AIMS embarked on a project to develop a records management programme, which entailed the conducting of several information audits. The project was structured in five major phases as shown in table 1. AIMS's contract ended on 31 May 2005, with the implementation starting on 1 June 2005.

Table 1: Stages of the development of records management system for the COGTA (COGTA File reference number 2/2/2/2)

Stage	Description	Duration
Stage 1: Set-up	Discussion with the department regarding the scope of the project, dates, work plan, etc.	10 working days
Stage 2: Assessment	Records audit Evaluation of system in use Functional analysis Workshop	24 working days

Stage	Description	Duration
Stage 3: Development	File plan drafted Records management policy drafted Records control schedule drafted Procedure manual drafted	39 working days
Stage 4: Clean-up	Overseeing the collection of records from various directorates to the central registry	Simultaneous with the above
Stage 5: Implementation	Training and roll-out Assistance with the opening of new files	28 working days

Early in 2005, the department appointed a records manager to transform its records system. The greatest challenge was to create a central registry system for the whole department that would cater for all records. The restructuring of the department necessitated that the system should embrace the old and prepare for the newly restructured organisation. Additionally, this entire process was influenced by the National Archives and Records Service Act and the Promotion of Access to Information Act, as the department is governed by both Acts.

### 3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

As stated in the introduction, a number of benefits are derived from implementing a proper records management programme. Furthermore, government departments in South Africa are required by laws such as the National Archives and Records Service Act 43 of 1996 to develop a records management programme. Despite legal requirements and the benefits offered by the records management programme, researchers such as Kemoni and Ngulube (2007:122), Mnjama (2005:457), Ngoepe and Van der Walt (2009:110) and Ngulube and Tafor (2006) concur that public sector records management programmes in most African countries are plagued by various problems. The tradition of organisational support for records management practices in many countries is weak (Kemoni & Ngulube 2007:122). Many organisations, including government departments, struggle to develop records management programmes to meet business needs. The IRMT (1999a) makes the observation that developing a records management programme is highly complex and difficult, to the extent that it is common for records management projects to exceed scheduled completion dates or not be completed at all. Abbot (2007) argues that the problem of a lack of a proper records management programme in the South African public sector is aggravated by a number of factors such as lack of proper structures, policies, vision from leadership, and skills. In view of the prevailing state of recordkeeping in South Africa, the study reported on here examined the principles involved in establishing a records management programme at the COGTA. Furthermore, the study captured lessons learnt with regard to the development of a records management programme by the COGTA.

The objectives of the study were to

- investigate whether records management strategy, policies, procedures, processes, and systems for the creation, maintenance, storage and disposal of records have been implemented in the COGTA;
- investigate the level of records management skills in the COGTA;
- investigate the monitoring and reporting mechanisms for records management in the COGTA;
- investigate the impact of the placement of a records management unit in the COGTA; and
- assess the level of top management support on records management activities in the COGTA.

## **4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study used mixed methods research (MMR) in order to maximise the theoretical implications of research findings. Ngulube, Mokwatlo and Ndwandwe (2009:108) argue that MMR involves combining qualitative or quantitative approaches to conduct an enquiry. Although a combination of research approaches may be frowned upon by some because of the vastly different theoretical backgrounds and methods of data collection in each, a combined approach proved valuable in this study, leading to greater understanding and providing a broad view of the existing records management situation in the department. Neuman (2000:122) suggests that “the best option is for a range of approaches that will allow flexibility in understanding problems, and in offering multiple insights into their solutions”. This point is also underscored by Ngulube, Mokwatlo and Ndwandwe (2009:105), as well as Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2009:265), who assert that “mixing research methods can add insights and understanding that might be missed when a mono-method (qualitative or quantitative) strategy is used.” Each approach adds something essential to the ultimate findings. Similar studies carried out elsewhere have set a precedent in utilising mixed methods research – for instance, Garaba and Ngulube (2008) used this method to investigate the management of former liberation movements’ records by national and private archival institutions in eastern and southern Africa; Kemoni and Ngulube (2007) used MMR to investigate the management of public sector records in Kenya; and Ngoepe and Van der Walt (2009) utilised MMR to explore records management trends in the South African public sector.

### **4.1 DATA COLLECTION TOOLS**

This study used a combination of data collection tools, with the self-administered questionnaire as the principal instrument for data collection. Self-administered questionnaires are easily distributed to a large number of people and they often allow anonymity (Anderson & Poole 2001:17; Mitchell & Jolley 2004:180). However, the



method relies on other people to complete the questionnaire. Data was supplemented through interviews and direct observation. In research, the use of various methods to collect the same data, or triangulation, is highly recommended (Nachmias & Nachmias 1996:226).

## 4.2 POPULATION AND SAMPLING

The population for this study was all the employees of the COGTA. At the time of the study, the COGTA had four buildings a block apart in Arcadia, Pretoria. The department's internal telephone directory, which listed 338 employees and their designations according to directorates, was used as a sampling frame to select the sample. This study used a stratified random sampling, since the population from which the sample was drawn did not constitute a homogeneous group. The reasons for this were the following:

- The population comprised 80 senior managers, 22 information management staff members (records management, IT and library staff members) and 236 other general staff members. The assumption was that these sub-populations could have different ways of managing their records. There would be more general staff members, which would mean that if one took a simple random sample or systematic sample, information management staff would not be adequately represented. The result would be skewed, as general staff members would be overrepresented.
- With stratified random sampling, researchers do not leave the representativeness of the sample entirely to chance. Instead, they make sure that the sample is similar to the population in certain respects. The attraction of this technique is that it reduces the standard error by controlling a proportion of the variance (Sapsford 1999:70). A stratified sample was obtained by separating the population elements into three sub-stratums, namely information management staff members, senior managers and other staff members. A simple random sample was then taken from each stratum and the sub-samples were combined to form the total sample of 100. The sample in each stratum was taken in proportion to the size of the stratum. Thus, of the sample of 100, six per cent were information management staff members, 24 per cent were senior managers and 70 per cent were other general staff members. This was calculated by finding the size of the total population (338) and calculating the percentage represented by each group as follows:
  - % information management staff =  $(22 / 338) \times 100 = 6\%$
  - % senior managers =  $(80 / 338) \times 100 = 24\%$
  - % other staff members =  $(236 / 338) \times 100 = 70\%$

All these factors indicated that the researchers were highly likely to obtain valid results if a stratified sample was used. By using stratified sampling, the researchers had all the advantages of random sampling and did not need to sample nearly as many people.

The questionnaire was tested using ten COGTA staff members to minimise measurement errors. Some questions in the questionnaire were changed following a pre-test as a result of the feedback from the pilot group. The results from the pre-test were not combined with the results of the post-test. Approval was obtained from the director-general before a website link to the questionnaire was sent to 100 respondents during January and February 2008.

Only 52 respondents completed and submitted the questionnaire online, representing a 52 per cent return rate. Returned questionnaires were automatically analysed using an online open source survey tool. Interviews were conducted with the Chief Director: Human Resources (under which the administration support service directorate fell), the former records manager, the current records managers, one registry clerk and three officials who were part of the pilot group for the electronic records management system, and eight administrative assistants to supplement and clarify data obtained via questionnaires. This provided the opportunity to triangulate the data in order to strengthen the research findings and conclusion. The department's registry was visited three times during the study (14 January 2008, 11 June 2009 and 18 November 2009).

## **5 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **5.1 RESPONDENT PROFILE**

Of those who filled in and returned questionnaires, 51.9 per cent (27) were male, and 48.1 per cent (25) were female. Respondents' qualifications ranged from matric certificates to post-graduate degrees. Only 3.8 per cent (2) of the respondents indicated that they were studying towards a qualification in archival science and records management at the time.

As shown in figure 1, of the 52 respondents, 19.2 per cent (10) were senior managers and higher, and 5.7 per cent (3) were from the Information Management Unit. The other 48 per cent (25) were general staff members (assistant directors, deputy directors, administrators, researchers, etc) and 25 per cent (13) were administrative assistants (secretaries to senior managers and above). Only one respondent did not indicate his/her position within the department.

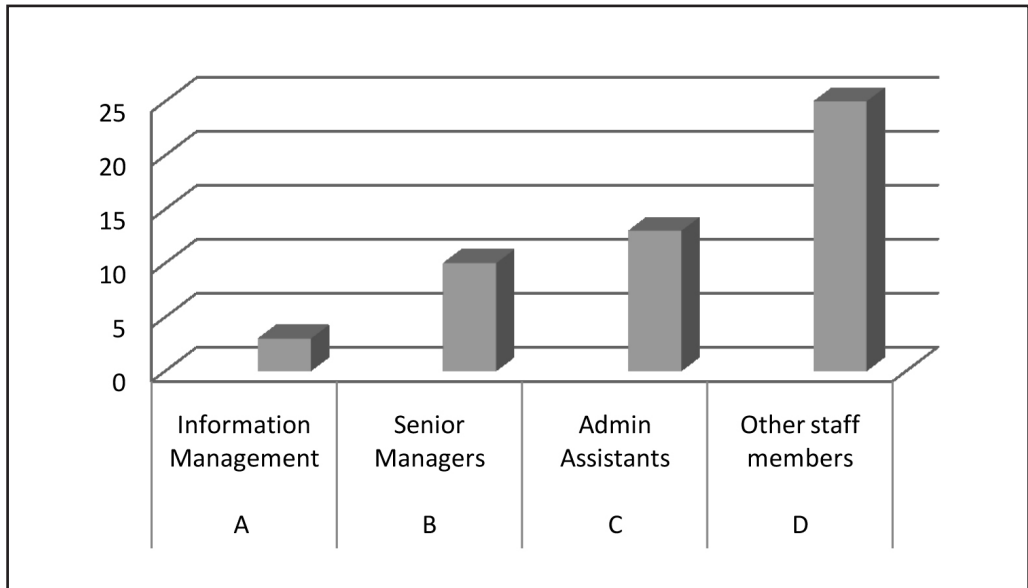


Figure 1: Positions held by the respondents

## 5.2 DATA ANALYSIS

### 5.2.1 Records management programme and its placement within the COGTA

All government bodies that are governed by the National Archives and Records Service (NARS) Act 43 of 1996 are required to establish a records management programme in conformity with standards and codes of best practice in records management approved by the national archivist. The purpose of the question in this section of the questionnaire was to establish whether the COGTA had developed such a records management programme and whether the respondents were aware of it. Of the respondents, 98 per cent (51) were aware that the COGTA had a formal records management programme, compared with 1.9 per cent (1) who were not aware of the programme.

The programme was centralised and placed within the Directorate: Administrative Support Services, which encompassed other functions such as Security Services, Building and Maintenance and Facilities Management. Of the respondents, 44 per cent (23) believed that the location of the records management function within the Directorate: Administrative Support Services had a positive impact on records management provision in the department. However, the remaining 55.7 per cent (29) argued that the placing of the records management function under this directorate had a negative impact on records management provision in the department. Reasons cited included the opinion that if it reported to Administrative Support Services, records management received

little attention, which would not be the case if it were placed under the ICT Directorate, which already had leverage support from senior managers.

### **5.2.2 Records management policies and procedures**

Government departments are required to develop a policy that regulates records management activities. Officials are then compelled by the policy to practise proper records management. For the policy to be effective, it has to be endorsed by the head of the government department as well as the top management team. It should also be communicated and implemented throughout the organisation. The purpose of the questions in this section of the questionnaire was to establish whether the COGTA had a records management policy and procedures, and whether officials were managing records accordingly.

Only 7.7 per cent (4) of the respondents were unaware that the COGTA had a records management policy. They indicated that they had neither been invited to comment on the policy nor made aware of its existence. Of those who indicated awareness of the policy, 52 per cent (27) indicated that they were not sure whether the policy had been endorsed by top management. As a result, some were not managing records according to the policy. Others argued that the consultants brought in to develop the records management system did not understand the nature of the COGTA's business, and that the system therefore did not make provision for their needs.

### **5.2.3 Records management responsibilities**

Records management is a shared responsibility among users, senior managers and records management staff. The purpose of this section was to establish whether records management responsibilities had been communicated to all staff members in the COGTA. Of the respondents, 40 per cent (21) indicated that records management, or what they called "filing", was the responsibility of administrative assistants (secretaries) within their directorates, while 50 per cent (26) indicated that it was the responsibility of the registry clerks. Only ten per cent (5) indicated that records management responsibilities within the COGTA had been communicated and were the responsibility of all staff members. According to the responses, the communication had taken the form of an electronic memo (a copy of the memo was shown to one of the researchers) issued by the head of the department committing herself to establishing and maintaining proper records management. Responses from senior managers indicated that their secretaries were responsible for records management.

### **5.2.4 Records classification system**

According to section 13(2)(b)(i) of the NARS Act, the national archivist is responsible for determining the records classification systems to be applied by government bodies. A records classification system/file plan provides a means of knowing what records

exist and where they are kept in an organisation. It also facilitates easy access to records. The purpose of this section of the questionnaire was to establish whether the COGTA had an approved records classification system and whether officials were managing records according to it.

The COGTA had a file plan that was approved in April 2005 (the approval letter issued by the national archivist was shown to one of the researchers). Only 63.5 per cent (33) indicated that they had received training in the implementation of the approved file plan. However, they indicated that the training was not sufficient because it was offered only once, for one to four hours. Of the respondents, 65 per cent (34) indicated that they filed according to the approved file plan. The other 35 per cent (18) indicated that they filed according to either date, directorate or subject, such as meetings and reports.

### **5.2.5 Physical records storage**

In South Africa, government departments are required by the NARS directives to keep their records in a spacious office area centrally located and known as a registry. The office space allocated for use as a registry must be able to accommodate the growth in documentation. The COGTA registry was visited on three occasions (14 January 2008, 11 June 2009 and 18 November 2009) by one of the researchers during the study period. These visits revealed that a spacious office area had been allocated to the registry to accommodate growth in documentation. The allocation of spacious storage can be attributed to the fact that the records management function reported to the senior manager who was responsible for the allocation of office space.

The researcher also had the opportunity to visit the COGTA's archives storage. The COGTA had inherited large volumes of records from the previous dispensation, and these had not been properly arranged and described, and therefore could not be easily retrieved. Many of these records need to remain accessible over time, and those with archival value must be transferred to the national archives repository for permanent preservation. According to the COGTA's records manager, a large percentage of these records, however, had no enduring business or historical value and needed to be destroyed. Some of these records had exceeded their useful business life, but were still being kept by the COGTA. Others still had business value, but the COGTA was unable to access them. This, in turn, would lead to the COGTA having difficulty meeting the requirements of Promotion of Access to Information Act 2 of 2000. These records needed to be properly identified and managed to ensure compliance with archival legislation as well as easy retrieval of information. The results of the interviews indicated that vast stores of unclassified records in the COGTA had built up over years as a result of factors such as:

- Lack of resources in the COGTA to manage records;
- Absence or poor implementation of records management policy and procedures;

- Inability to distinguish historical records from those with temporary value; as a result, everything was kept;
- Low awareness of the importance of proper records management practices;
- Staff changes that leave the context of many records unknown;
- Absence of a disposal authority from the NARS permitting destruction of records.

It was only during the beginning of 2008 that the COGTA embarked on a project to arrange and describe records inherited from the previous dispensation.

Figure 2 indicates where the respondents stored their records. Only 42.3 per cent (22) of respondents stored their records in the registry, while 36.5 per cent (19) kept records either in their offices or within their directorates. Only 5.7 per cent (3) stored records on a shared drive; 11.5 per cent (6) stored records on an electronic records management system, and 3.8 per cent (2) did not indicate where they stored records. All the respondents felt that the records storage areas were secure. However, those who stored records in their offices or within their directorates indicated that those records could be accessed by themselves only. They also indicated that they did not have sufficient space to store their records. This can be attributed to the fact that they were not using the registry for storage purposes. One respondent (1.9%) indicated that arrangements had been made with the registry to open files for his/her directorate and keep them on permanent loan.

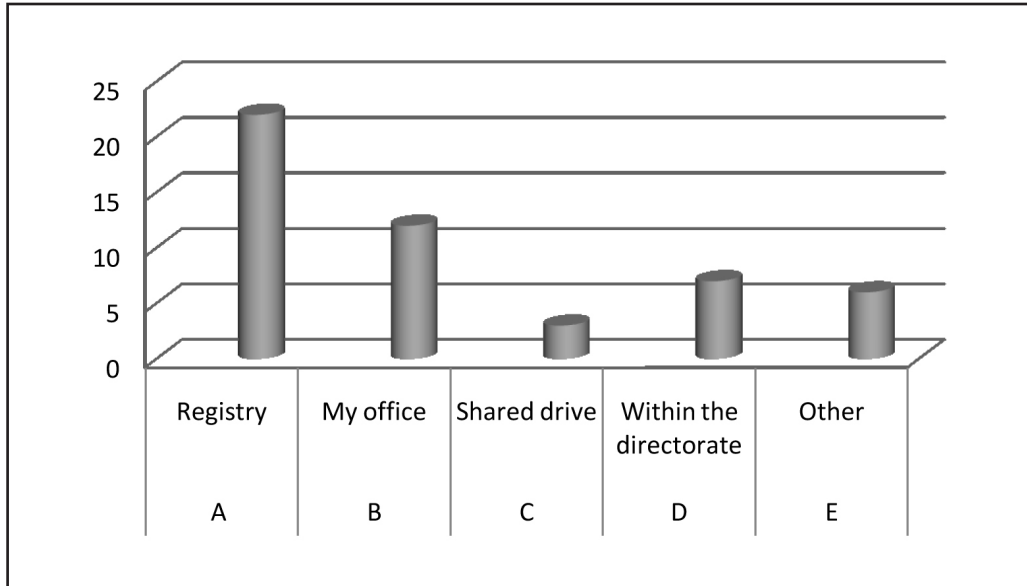


Figure 2: Records storage area

### **5.2.6 Records control**

The purpose of tracking records is to document their movements so that the organisation knows where its records are at any time. Tracking may also be used to monitor the use of records and to maintain an auditable trail of record-keeping processes, such as access by users. In addition, tracking may be used to ensure that a particular record is dealt with by the person to whom it has been assigned, and that action is taken by a predetermined date. Based on the results of the questionnaires, it appears that only control cards and registers were used as a control mechanism to monitor the movement of paper-based files within the COGTA. Only 40.3 per cent (21) of the respondents indicated that files were lost in the department owing to the lack of a tracking mechanism, negligence of the registry clerks, staff members borrowing files and keeping them too long in their offices, officials transferring records from one office to another without informing the registry, the registry not registering files borrowed, or difficult staff members who did not want to sign for borrowed files. The 31 other respondents (59.6%) indicated that they had never experienced losses of files in the registry or in the department.

### **5.2.7 Access and usage of records**

The purpose of the question in this section was to establish the accessibility of records in the COGTA. Of the respondents, 80 per cent (42) were not sure whether it was the Records Management Unit or the Legal Services Directorate that was responsible for implementing the Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA) in the COGTA. The PAIA is the law that gives effect to section 32 of the Constitution, in which the right of access to information is entrenched. Section 32 of the Constitution provides that everyone has the right of access to any information held by the state or held by any other person that is to be used for the protection or exercising of any right. The respondents were of the opinion that the Records Management Unit should implement the PAIA, while the Legal Services Unit should monitor the implementation. Others felt that the two units should work together, as their responsibilities had not been clearly communicated. Despite this uncertainty, however, in 2006 the COGTA was ranked third by the South African Human Rights Commission and the Open Democracy Advice Centre among national government departments that implemented the PAIA properly.

As far as internal usage and access to records were concerned, 40.3 per cent (21) were worried about the length of time it took them to get records from the registry. This was due to the fact that their offices were located in other buildings some blocks away from the registry.

### **5.2.8 Electronic records management**

In South Africa, electronic records are subject to the same requirements in the NARS Act that apply to the management of other records. The purpose of this section of the questionnaire was to establish how the COGTA managed records that were created

or received electronically, such as e-mails and SMSes. Only 11.5 per cent (6) of the respondents mentioned that they filed electronic records on an electronic document and records management system (EDRMS) called Hummingbird. (The COGTA piloted Hummingbird and procured 33 licences in 2004.) A further 59.6 per cent (31) made printouts and filed the hard copy. Only 23 per cent (12) indicated that they deleted records at their own discretion, and 5.7 per cent (3) filed records on shared drives or e-mails on GroupWise.

The respondents appeared unsure about the role played by the Records Management Unit and ICT Directorate with regard to the management of electronic records. However, most respondents (70%) felt that electronic records management should not be the responsibility of the ICT Directorate. They argued that the ICT Directorate should simply provide the architecture based on the specifications provided by the users and the Records Management Unit. Three staff members who formed part of the pilot group were visited to see how they worked with the system. Of the three, only one from the ICT Directorate was using all the functionalities of the system, and filed records on the system – the other two did not have even a single record filed on the system. These two users indicated that the piloted system did not meet their needs because it did not have the necessary records management functionalities. The interview with the records manager revealed that not even a single member of the Records Management Unit was part of the pilot group for the EDRMS in the department. This project was highly likely to fail because the decision to pilot the EDRMS had not been based on a sound analysis of the business requirements of the office. The users and records management staff were of the opinion that the rollout of an EDRMS was essentially a records management issue and not an ICT issue. The ICT Directorate failed to indicate to the researcher the criteria used to select the pilot group for the system. The interview with the records manager revealed that the records management staff lacked technical expertise in electronic records management; for this reason the ICT Directorate was taking the lead in the EDRMS project. In 2009, the COGTA purchased an additional 248 licences to roll out the EDRMS to the entire organisation. However, the project was suspended in 2010 owing to the restructuring of the COGTA.

When asked why the COGTA was implementing proprietary software when the government had approved a framework to facilitate the implementation of free open source software (FOSS) in the public service, the Chief Director: Human Resources indicated that the proprietary tool that the COGTA had piloted had proved to be significantly better than the FOSS. However, she indicated that the COGTA was ready to migrate to FOSS in future.



### **5.2.9 Records management training**

Records management is a shared responsibility. Therefore, creators of records should be equipped with the necessary skills to capture and manage records. The purpose of this section of the questionnaire was to establish whether the COGTA conducted regular records management training, and who facilitated the training. The respondents were asked to indicate whether they had attended the internal records management training. Of the respondents, 48 per cent (25) indicated that they attended the training on file plan usage only once during the implementation in 2005. A further 15.3 per cent (8) had attended the training during the induction, while 36.5 per cent (19) stated that they had never attended the training (offered by both the records manager and consultants). The respondents felt that the department had spent a great deal of money on the consultants, but that there had been no skills transfer.

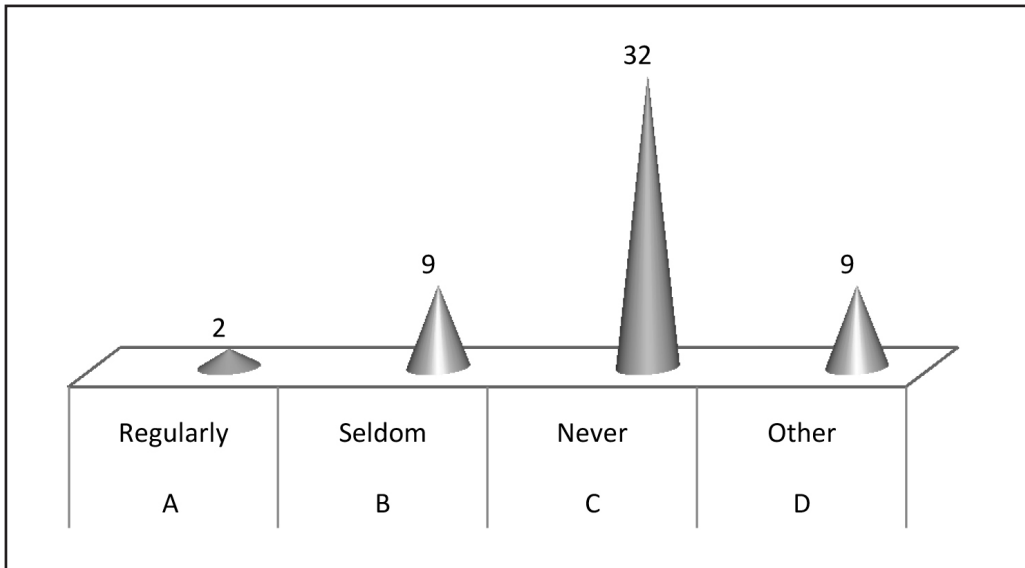
Interviews with the records manager revealed that during the implementation of the records management system several training sessions were organised for the users. The biggest challenge associated with training was attendance. Despite daily reminders, training attendance remained poor. After the system was implemented the users started asking the registry for further training.

### **5.2.10 Disaster recovery plan**

Having a disaster recovery plan can help organisations in the event of a disaster. The purpose of the question in this section of the questionnaire was to establish whether the COGTA had developed such a plan for the records. Interviews with the records manager revealed that the COGTA had not yet developed a disaster recovery plan for the records. Furthermore, vital records in the COGTA had not yet been identified and backed up.

### **5.2.11 Disposal of records**

In accordance with section 13(2)(a) of the NARS Act, no public records under the control of any governmental body may be transferred to an archives repository, destroyed, erased or otherwise disposed of without a written disposal authority issued by the national archivist. The implementation of a disposal authority enables a government department to dispose of its records regularly. According to the respondents, only the Office of the Minister had disposal authority for the records. As reflected in figure 3, 3.8 per cent (2) of the respondents destroyed records regularly, while 17.3 per cent (9) did so randomly. 61.5 per cent (32) indicated that they did not destroy records at all. The remaining 17.3 per cent (9) indicated that it was the responsibility of the registry to destroy records. Those who destroyed records indicated that records were destroyed when the owners or creators resigned or when they wanted to decongest their storage area. It appears from the responses that the COGTA did not have a retention schedule for its records.



**Figure 3: Disposal of records**

The interview with the records manager revealed that the COGTA had requested a disposal authority from the NARS in 2005. However, the disposal authority was never issued to the department. The letter containing the NARS's acknowledgement of receipt of the request for disposal authority by the COGTA, dated 31 May 2005, was shown to the researcher. The records manager indicated that numerous attempts had been made to contact the NARS to expedite the issuing of disposal authority, but without success. The NARS cited a shortage of staff as the reason for the delay in issuing disposal authorities.

### **5.2.12 Strengths and weaknesses of the records management function in the COGTA**

When asked about the strength of the COGTA's records management function, 86.5 per cent (45) of respondents indicated compliance with legislation as one of the strengths of the function: in this regard, they indicated that there was an approved records classification system, as well as records management policy and procedures. Some indicated the support received from the director-general as a strength, but lack of understanding of records management by senior managers as a weakness. Some of the challenges mentioned by respondents included: users wanted to file in their own way; duplication of records in different locations, resulting in a lot of space being taken up; unqualified records management staff; the fact that the registry had operated without a records manager for a long time (approximately nine months); and high turnover of records management staff (the registry lost ten staff members from director to registry clerk level in less than two years – these staff members constituted 90 per cent of the team that had implemented the COGTA records management programme in 2005). The

other concern expressed by respondents was that the NARS was not helping, as it had not conducted audits or any inspection at the COGTA for a long time. The lack of a records disaster recovery plan was also mentioned as a risk.

### 5.3 DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

In view of the above questionnaires, interviews and observation results, it is clear that the COGTA has taken a number of initiatives to implement proper records management practices. For example, the COGTA has engaged consultants to develop a records management programme, which resulted in an approved and implemented records classification system, records management policy and procedures. In outsourcing the development and implementation of the records management programme, the COGTA benefited from the expertise of the service provider, since in the end the department was able to comply with the basic requirements of archival legislation. The COGTA was even ranked third by the Open Democracy Advice Centre and South African Human Rights Commission for the Golden Key Awards in 2006, in recognition of a government department that best implemented the PAIA. However, a few respondents expressed the view that outsourcing the development of the COGTA records management programme had not benefited the department. One of the reasons given was that consultants came, developed the system and left. The respondents felt that there was no proper skills transfer, because the consultants were in a hurry to finish the project so that they could move on to the next one. This, according to the respondents, resulted in a vicious circle, as the same consultants would be used in future to rectify their own mistakes, and would be reimbursed for this. As shown in table 2, there are pros and cons associated with the use of both consultants and in-house staff.

**Table 2: Using consultants versus in-house staff (Katuu 2007:11)**

Consultants	In-house staff
Pros	Cons
Have experience	May not have experience
Are able to dedicate all their time to the project	May not be able to dedicate all their time to the project
Can be held totally accountable	Difficult to hold totally accountable
Cons	Pros
May not initially understand the organisational culture and vision/mission	Immediately understand the organisational culture, vision and goals
May be very expensive	Very cost-effective
May not engage in knowledge and skill transfer	Development of organisational knowledge and skills

There is an indication that the COGTA’s records management function does receive support from the director-general. This was deduced from the fact that some respondents

reported that the director-general did not approve submissions or memos without an approved file plan reference number. This was done to enforce the use of the file plan. The hiring of consultants by the department to develop a records management system also showed commitment from top management. The idea of bringing in consultants for the development of the records management system was initiated and sponsored by the director-general. This can be attributed to either a willingness to comply with archival legislation or an attempt to facilitate the easy retrieval of information in the department to help in decision making. The COGTA had also appointed a records manager at deputy director level in terms of section 13(5)(a) of the NARS Act to maintain the records management programme.

While the COGTA has a well-established tradition of a hard-copy records management-based programme, the same cannot be said of electronic records management. It is clear from the responses that the relationship between the ICT Directorate and the Records Management Unit had not been clarified and defined. As a result, information stakeholders operate in silos, and do not communicate effectively with one another. For example, the ICT Directorate still defined and implemented EDRMS solutions with minimal involvement of records management staff. In view of the above discussion, the results of the study can be summarised as follows:

- There is evidence of top management's support for records management activities, for instance through the appointment of consultants to develop and implement the records management programme.
- There is a lack of appropriate records management experts and specialists in the department.
- Turnover in the Records Management Unit in the COGTA is high: the COGTA had lost almost everybody who started with the records management project in 2005. As a result, there is no succession planning with regard to records management.
- The COGTA operated without a records manager for a long time (nine months).
- The records manager has been appointed at deputy director level. In consideration of government hierarchy and bureaucracy, this level is low, as an official at that level does not have the authority to interact with top management. Therefore, it is possible that the records management function will not be well represented when key decisions are made in strategic meetings of the department.
- The roles and responsibilities of the Records Management Unit are not clearly defined or communicated to staff members. For instance, it is not clear whether the Records Management Unit or the Legal Services Division within the COGTA is responsible for implementing the PAIA. Moreover, it is also not clear whether the IT Directorate or the Records Management Unit is responsible for the management of electronic records.

- Compliance with legislation is inconsistent. For instance, there is no control over the disposal of records; some respondents indicated that they destroy electronic records such as e-mails at their own discretion.
- There is no integrated records management risk-mitigating framework in the COGTA. As a result, the department is vulnerable to information loss in the event of a disaster.
- The existing records management staff members within the COGTA are not well positioned to function in an electronic work environment, which requires record specialists to serve as coaches and advisors on record-keeping matters to officials at all levels in the department.
- A tendency exists amongst staff in the department to take personal ownership of records and to keep them out of the central storage area. As a result, there is a limited culture of information sharing.
- There is fragmentation of official records in the COGTA, as some directorates do not want to send their records to the registry for filing.
- Failure of the NARS to exercise authority over the control of records in governmental bodies is evident. For example, respondents indicated that the NARS has not done an inspection at the COGTA since 2005.
- Based on information obtained from the previous records manager, there was a tendency to dump unproductive, idle, disruptive or redundant staff members in records management units within the COGTA.

## **6 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings of this study clearly illustrate the value of establishing the strategies, policies and control framework necessary for a proper records management programme. Setting up correct policies, procedures and practices is important for building a culture of proper records management in the organisation. The establishment of an effective records management programme is based on

- understanding among public servants at all levels of the importance of records and recognition of the need for a records management programme (policies, systems and standards for capturing and maintaining records); and
- records professionals who know how to develop, implement and maintain the records management programme.

The challenges associated with implementing a records management programme in a government department are not unique to the COGTA. Records management programmes are in danger of collapse (through resource reductions, resignations, retirements, etc) in various government departments and few people are equipped with the knowledge,

skills and abilities required to develop and rebuild programmes that are relevant to the business and accountability needs. This study has revealed that the commitment of top management is of enormous value in the implementation of a records management system. Indeed, without the support of top management, attempts to implement a records management programme will be fruitless. For the COGTA to achieve improvements in records management, it will require strong leadership and an improvement agenda that is endorsed at a high level and supported throughout the department. A records management system will function effectively only if it is developed as part of the larger managerial environment, so that procedures reflect overall management objectives. Unless the records management initiatives have the support of those who hold power in the COGTA, all the initiatives that the department has undertaken are doomed to fail.

Although the support of higher management is essential for implementing the programme, the backing and cooperation of users are also needed. Records management scholars have observed that the biggest hurdle for most records management change initiatives is convincing others to implement it (Mbakile 2007:4). Most implementation programmes fail because implementation neglects the most crucial element, namely the human factor. According to Katuu (2007:28) the human factor could account for up to 80 per cent of the project's costs in training. The introduction of new systems for managing records will have an impact on all members of staff who create or use records. Records managers have a delicate task to perform when working with staff members who are often very possessive about records and may be apprehensive or unsympathetic when records management programmes are devised and standards imposed. Therefore, the users need to be involved when records management programmes are developed and implemented.

The following recommendations are made:

- The COGTA should develop an integrated risk management framework.
- The COGTA should develop skills for records management staff and employ additional people with records management expertise.
- The COGTA records management programme should be evaluated through any of the following methods:
  - a post-implementation workshop
  - an internal audit of records management activities
  - a survey.
- The department should introduce a culture of accountability among its employees, which should take the form of an internal audit of the records management function, as well as the naming and shaming of non-compliant directorates.
- The department should procure software for tracking files.
- Training in records management should be compulsory in the department.

- Information sessions on records management should be conducted throughout the year, and should not only be event driven.
- There should be a service level agreement between the records management unit and users, where each commits himself/herself to his/her records management responsibilities.
- The DPLG Human Resource Unit should develop and implement a retention strategy to retain employees.
- The Records Management Unit should be grouped with other units that are concerned with information, such as the ICT Directorate and the Knowledge Management Unit.
- The COGTA should engage in benchmarking with other government departments regarding the records management function.
- The department should take part in forums where information on records management is shared, for instance by participating in the activities of the South African Society of Archivists, South African Records Management Forum, and Deputy Information Officer's Forum.
- The administrators of records in the COGTA must be knowledgeable concerning electronic records management and information technology, in addition to their professional training.
- Registries are usually centrally established, as is the case in the COGTA. However, it is sometimes necessary to establish decentralised registries. Decentralised registries are usually established if there would be unnecessary delays in accessing files if they were not kept near individuals working with them. This applies in the case of the COGTA, since it occupies four buildings. However, decentralised registries can give rise to inconsistent systems and records management practices, as well as duplication of files. It also requires the use of more office space and shelving, and prevents the accurate estimation of staff recruitment and training needs. Should a government department consider having registries in other buildings, the following should be taken into account:
  - The classification system and records management policy should remain uniform.
  - The receipt, opening and dispatch of mail should remain the function of the main registry, which will ensure that the correct file reference numbers are allocated to all mail.
  - Staff members should be trained in the main registry to enable them to gain the necessary skills to manage records properly and to facilitate the interchange of staff when necessary.

Even though the study found that the COGTA had developed and implemented policies for records management, it is clear from the above discussions that the department has

a long way to go as far as recordkeeping is concerned. Finally, a further study on the investigation of records management models in the public sector should be conducted.

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