

Improving your organisation's records and information management capacity – Part I

The need for individuals and organisations to see if their organisation has in place the things it needs to manage records and information well can not be over looked, going by the role played by proper management and security of records and information in the success of any organisation.

The work of assessing and improving an organisation's records management capacity will usually need to be done by someone who works inside the organisation, although it may be possible to hire an expert consultant to carry out the work or to hire a temporary staff member who can concentrate on the project.

What Does Records and Information management Capacity Mean?

An organisation's records and information management capacity is the ability of its structures, processes, staff, resources and rules to work together to manage its records and information well. Usually, an organisation needs a little of all of these things to manage its records and information at all. There is no point in having well-trained records and information management staff if they do not have clear procedures to use to do their work. There is not much benefit in having clear records and information management policies and procedures if there are no staff to carry them out.

In order to have a basic level of record and information management capacity, organisations need to have in place the right people, resources, policies and processes to make sure that they can:

- create the records and information they need
- find the records and information they need when they need them
- preserve their records and information for as long as they are needed
- make accountable decisions about which records and information are no longer needed.

Without adequate records and information, organisations cannot do their work efficiently or account for their actions. Records and information are vital for the good governance and efficient management of any organisation. If records are not managed properly, records storage facilities can become full, and the records can become increasingly difficult to access.

Recommended Checklist

Organisations can use this checklist as a monitoring tool to evaluate and review how their records and information are being managed and to see where they need to make improvements to their records and information management arrangements. If the organisation cannot answer 'yes' to all of the questions in the checklist, it does not have the ability to meet its basic records and information management requirements, and should begin to make improvements.

Each of the ten (10) questions in the checklist also includes a description of the kinds of things an organisation needs to be able to do to answer 'yes' to the question. There are also suggestions on what the organisation can do to perform better in that area. This information can provide useful guidance on where an organisation can begin to improve its records and information management capacity.

The Checklist

1. Does the organisation have a records and information management policy? Yes/No

Records and information management policy should:

- be written down
- be signed by the chief executive officer of the organisation or another senior officer
- be issued to all staff
- describe the responsibilities that all staff have for managing records
- include email and other electronic records in its definition of records
- allow for penalties for staff who do not comply with the policy.

Having a records and information management policy helps staff to understand the importance of managing records and information properly, and sets the broad standards that staff should follow to achieve good records and information management.

2. Do the senior managers of your organisation support good records and information management? Yes/No

Senior management can show their support for good records and information management by:

- assigning overall responsibility for records and information management to a senior manager in the organisation, such as the head of corporate services or the undersecretary
- providing adequate budget resources for records and information management staff and equipment
- ensuring that breaches of the organisation's records and information management policy are properly investigated and appropriate penalties applied.

Having support from senior managers makes it much easier to keep good records and information. If senior managers show that they support good records and information management, other staff will understand that keeping good records and information is important and will follow the procedures and rules set by senior managers.

3. Is responsibility for records management tasks assigned to a specific area of the organisation? Yes/No

While all staff are responsible for managing records and information of the work they do, someone within the organisation needs to manage the records on a day-to-day basis. If no-

one is assigned to manage records and information, no one will do it, and the organisation will not be able to meet its records and information management requirements.

Organisations that assign responsibility for records and information management usually have a records management unit or registry that is responsible for managing all of the records of the organisation. In small organisations this role might be assigned to a particular position, such as a records manager or administration officer. It is extremely important that every organisation has someone whose job it is to manage the records and information of the organisation.

4. Do the organisation's records and information management staff have enough training to do their jobs? Yes/No

Just as in any area of organisation business, records and information management staff need training to do their jobs properly. Staff who are assigned to an organisation's records and information management unit should:

- know how to identify a record and what makes records different to other types of information
- be familiar with standard records management practices such as file registration and movements, safe records handling, and records disposal
- be able to analyse the records and information management requirements of the organisation.

Having well-trained records and information management staff helps to ensure that the records are managed well, because staff will know how to do the work and will be able to do it quickly and efficiently.

5. Does the organisation have procedures for managing its records and information? Yes/No

Records management procedures should:

- be written down
- not conflict with the organisation's records and information management policy
- state clearly who is responsible for carrying out the work described in the procedures.

Records and information management functions and activities need to be properly defined and written down so that people know what steps are needed to manage the records well. Having in place guidelines, procedures and forms can help records and information management units and other staff who handle records to ensure that they are taking the right steps to manage the organisation's records and information.

6. Does the organisation know what its records and information management requirements are? Yes/No

Records and information management requirement is a need to keep evidence of the organisation's actions and decisions. Records and information management requirements are usually documented in rules, procedures or other guidelines that show that an

organisation might need to create, keep, provide access to or deal in some special way with a file or other type of record. To understand its records and information management requirements, an organisation needs to identify and examine the various laws, policies and procedures it works with and recognise where these documents require it to keep records. Organisations cannot usually understand all of their records and information management requirements without conducting an analysis of these sources.

7. Can the organisation find particular records when it needs them? Yes/No

Organisations will be able to find their records and information more easily if they:

- keep a file movement register, so they know where each of their files is at all times
- store their records and information in a secure place, so that they cannot be stolen or misplaced
- have a system for naming and numbering files that all staff can understand.

Good records and information management is an efficient way of making sure staff can find the information they need to do their jobs effectively. There is not much point in keeping good records about the organisation's actions and decisions if no-one can find that information when they need it.

8. Does the organisation abide by the government's rules for deciding when its records can be destroyed? Yes/No

In many countries, the national archives is responsible for making decisions about which government records can be destroyed and which ones need to be kept. This is so that the archives can select the records that should be preserved forever as part of the national history. The archives can also act as a neutral decision-maker, making sure that government agencies do not destroy records that need to be kept for public accountability purposes.

If there are no national rules for deciding how long governments should keep their records, organisations will need to make their own decisions. To do this properly, they should develop a written disposal schedule, which is based on the organisation's analysis of its records and information management requirements.

9. Are the organisation's records stored securely so that they cannot be stolen, damaged or altered? Yes/No

To protect records from loss, damage and destruction organisations should:

- keep files in a secure area that only the records and information management staff can access
- make sure staff in other areas of the organisation return files to the records management unit when they are not using them
- keep their records and information storage areas clean so that they do not attract rats and other pests that can destroy records
- have back-up systems for any computers that keep electronic records and information

- make sure staff understand that they cannot take papers from organisation files, and punish any staff who do this
- have a written plan for salvaging important records and information if there is a disaster.

Taking steps to keep records and information safe and secure will help to ensure that the records are available when your organisation needs them and that the information in them is accurate and reliable. If people are able to take papers from files, or take the files away, you will not have all of the information you may need about the organisation's actions and decisions.

10. Does the organisation set performance indicators for its records and information management unit, report on those indicators, and make improvements when indicators are not met? Yes/No

Performance indicators are goals that an organisation sets for itself, so that it can see how well it has been doing its job. An organisation might count the number of files it creates in a year or how long it takes staff to create a new file as a way of seeing how well the staff in the records and information management unit are performing and whether or not they are helping the rest of the organisation to operate efficiently.

If an area of an organisation is not meeting its performance indicators, this could mean that something is wrong and needs fixing.

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