

Managing semi current records: A case for records centres for the public service of Namibia

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Abstract

The records life cycle theory propagates for the management of records throughout their entire life cycle, i.e. from creation, through the stages when they are active, semi-active then non-current when disposition takes place and some records are destroyed and some preserved as archives. At various stages of their life cycle records need appropriate storage: records offices for current records; records centres for semi-current records; and archival facility for the non-current records identified during appraisal as worthy of permanent preservation. The provision of records centres ensures that there is no decongestion in the offices, safe-guards against haphazard destruction of records and ensures that records which end up as archives are protected from hazards which might damage or destroy them. This paper makes a case for the establishment of records centres for Namibia's public service semi-current records. The paper reports on findings of a study by the authors in April 2012, of commercial companies providing the public service of Namibia with records storage facilities. The authors make recommendations on how the management of semi-current records in the public service can be enhanced.

Introduction

The Archives Act No. 12 of 1992 (Office of the Prime Minister, 1992) which governs the management of records in the public sector in Namibia provides for the establishment of records centres, referred to in Section 5 of this Act as "intermediate depots". The same Act entrusts the National Archives of Namibia with the responsibility for the "regulation, execution, and administration of matters concerning the custody and care" (p. 4) of records in central government, regional and local government and parastatals. The Archives Code, the records management procedures manual issued by the Head of Archives in terms of Section 12 of the Archives Act, refers to the custody and care of records "until they are transferred to an archives depot or an intermediate depot" (National Archives of Namibia, p. 4). To date the public service of Namibia has not established any records centres (National Archives of Namibia, 2012).

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This paper reports the findings of a study conducted in May 2012, of commercial companies providing the public service of Namibia with records storage facilities. The paper also discusses the situation regarding semi-current records in the public service of Namibia as reported by the National Archives of Namibia in reports of records surveys conducted in ministries; departments; regional and local government; and parastatals in 2005, 2006, 2007, 2010, 2011 and 2012 (National Archives of Namibia, 2012). Studies on records management in the public service of Namibia by Barata, Bennett, Cain, & Routledge (2001); Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture (2004), Nengomasha (2004), Nengomasha (2009); Nengomasha and Amiss (2002) have also reported on the management of semi-current records. This paper makes a case for the establishment of records centres which have been reported as non-existent by these authors.

Background to the study

This section of the paper describes what a records centre is, highlighting its characteristics. The aim is to later on in the paper, compare what an ideal records centre should be with the commercial records centre facilities in Namibia.

Records centres

A records centre is defined as “a building or part of a building designed or adapted for the low-cost storage, maintenance and communication of semi-current records pending their ultimate disposal” (International Records Management Trust, 1999). Semi-current records are records which are rarely used in the conduct of current business. It makes economic sense that these records be kept in low cost storage. A records centre provides this through high-density storage. The records are managed in such a way that they are easily retrievable upon request by the owners of the records. The Namibia Archives Act refers to records centres as “intermediate depots” and rightly so as records centres are the storage facilities in the records life-cycle’s intermediate stage, between the registries or records offices and the archival institution.

There are different types of records centres. These include in-house and commercial records centres. The in-house records centre serves a parent organisation, for an example a university in-house records centre serving the university only and similarly a public service in-house records centre looking after government records only. Commercial records centres keep records of any institution for a fee. In Namibia there are four such facilities namely Phildou, Athema, One Call Solution and the Document Warehouse. A records centre system for the public service would establish in-house records centres for semi-current public records. The practice as in most African countries such as Zimbabwe, Malawi, Zambia, Botswana and South Africa, is to set up regional records centres. The benefit of regional records centres is well put by Tela (1993) regarding Zimbabwe’s regional records centres:

The National Archives has decentralised its services and it now has provincial offices numbering four to date. Such decentralisation obviates the necessity of transferring records to the Records Centre in Harare, hundreds of kilometres away from user Departments, which in the past slowed down retrieval of documents when required for reference (p. 95).

It should be pointed out here that having a records centre does not mean that the records of an organisation will automatically be saved. Chirwa (2003) reports on the situation in Malawi, where despite having a national records centre “... a large percentage of records perish within the creating agency’s premises out of neglect or ignorance” (p. 42). An effective records management programme of an organisation should have provision for

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the storage of semi-current records, separate from current records (records used often for current business) stored in registries or records offices. From these records centres, records worthy of permanent preservation are transferred to the National Archives.

According to Smith (2004, p. 5) the records centre is the fail-safe location for the protection of information assets and it provides the basic elements of any disaster prevention programme. The following two paragraphs describe the functions and characteristics of records centres. Later in the paper, the authors compare these commercial facilities against these functions and characteristics. The functions of a records centre include:

- Receiving records (in all formats and media) from creating agencies and storage;
- Provide off-site storage for vital records;
- Providing a reference service i.e. retrieving records upon request by the owners; and
- Applying/implementing disposal schedules i.e. destroying records as per records retention schedules and transferring records of permanent preservation to an archival facility (IRMT, 1999; The World Bank, 2000).

To be able to effectively carry out the functions indicated above, records centres must ensure that they have professionally qualified records staff; records must be transferred with their retention schedules and must have a conducive environment and facilities for records storage. The records manager cannot be concerned only with the loss of records due to catastrophic causes, but must also address issues such as environmental decay (Smith, 2004). This is particularly true of records on electronic media. Records centres should be “safe, secure, clean, efficient and economical” (International Records Management Trust, 1999, p. 9).

Security measures, both custodial and environmental are of outmost importance for records centres. Chirwa (1993) attributes some misconceptions about the safety of records in the National Archives Records Centre in Zambia as contributing to the lack of records transfers to the Records Centre. If there is any suspicion of poor security, clients will lose confidence of the records centre (International Records Management Trust, 1999). The building should be protected both internally and externally, against unauthorised access, fire, floods and other natural disasters. Measures include safe-guarding of the building at night, restriction of access to the storage areas, all external doors be kept locked, isolation of the records centre from any dangers that might threaten the safety of records, installation of automatic alarm systems as well as connection of these to the police, security and fire services. Records should not easily be located and retrieved by unauthorised persons through random selected locations. This means that records of one organisation could be in several locations in a records centre. The storage boxes should bear no markings that indicate their contents.

Temperature and humidity should fluctuate as little as possible within the storage facility and fall between 18-20 degrees Celsius and 40-55 per cent relative humidity. This is especially crucial if records of permanent value are stored in the facility. A records centre should not have any windows in the storage areas. If it's a building with windows adapted for records storage, the windows should have blinds or shades to protect records from natural light. Ultraviolet ray filter sheets for window glass are another inexpensive alternative. If fluorescent light fixtures are near archival material, purchase ultraviolet filter shields and slip these over the tubes. Walls should be constructed with permanent materials to lessen fire damage. These should preferably be four-hour protection firewalls (Developing an Inactive Records, 1994).

Cleanliness will protect records from damage from rodents or other infestation. No food or drink should be allowed in the records centre, which should be dusted, cleaned and inspected on a regular basis.

One of the benefits of using a records centre is that it provides high-density, low-cost storage. Within an office, the normal ratio of stored files to floor space is 1:1 storage space. In a records storage area, the ratio may range from 2:1 to 5:1, depending on the type of shelving, ceiling height, and live floor load (the weight capacity the floor can support). In addition, records centre equipment costs almost a third less than traditional office cabinets and shelves, and records centre floor space costs two-thirds less than office floor space (Developing an Inactive Records, 1994).

Semi-current records in the public service of Namibia

The National Archives of Namibia is the National institution which preserves the country's archival heritage and makes it accessible to the public. It is the memory of the nation and keeps records of government and of private sources. The National Archives also supervises the records management of government and parastatal institutions. In particular the records management section is tasked to give advice and leadership in records management related matters. This includes ensuring that regulated bodies comply with the requirements of the Archives Act. It is against this background that the records management section conducts record surveys (inspections) in ministries and departments, regional governments, local authorities and parastatals. One of the specific aims of these surveys is to identify how semi-current records are managed. Table one below gives a summary per region, of the number of institutions surveyed between 2010 and 2012, and the quantity of semi-current records in those institutions.

Table 1: Semi current records in surveyed regions

| Region | No of institutions surveyed in each region | Year survey conducted | Quantity of semi-current records in linear metres |
|---------------|---|------------------------------|--|
| Omaheke | 31 | 2010 | 637 |
| Erongo | 30 | 2010 | 1547 |
| Otjozondjupa | 64 | 2010 | 1212 |
| Khomas | 2 | 2011 | 776 |
| Ohangwena | 27 | 2012 | 635 |
| Oshikoto | 22 | 2012 | 408 |
| Khomas | 1 | 2012 | 429 |
| Total | 176 | | 5744 |

A total of approximately 5744 linear metres of semi current records were identified in 176 institutions in seven of Namibia's 13 regions. The records are kept in very poor conditions (see figures 1-5 below). They are just dumped in store rooms with broken down equipment and furniture covered in a lot of dust. While there is a provision in the Archives Act that regulated bodies must put in place retention and disposal schedules three years after the approval of the filing system, none of the 176 institutions had a retention and disposal

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schedule in place. This situation has resulted in records being prematurely destroyed deliberately or unknowingly. In some cases institutions are stuck with a lot of worthless records and some valuable ones that should have been transferred to a records centre or transferred to the National Archives for permanent preservation.

Figure 1: Congested registry/records office in one of the ministries



Figure 2: Record storage room at one of the regional councils



Figure 3: Records storage room at one of the ministries



Figure 4: Closed records (next to a leaking toilet) at one of the hospitals



Figure 5: Closed records at one of the municipalities



None of the 176 institutions had a disaster management preparedness plan. The records surveys revealed that records had been lost before in some institutions due to floods and fire. For an example, Oshikoto Regional Office, Ministry of Education and Immigration Office lost all the records in 2003 when their offices were gutted by fire (see figures 5 & 6). All records in the registry, the library and personnel records were reduced to ashes in the inferno. Some of these records were semi-current and non-current records which should have been transferred to a records centre or National Archives. It is also worth noting that 93 of these institutions had hand fire extinguishers installed in their offices but only 24 had them regularly serviced. Fifty-three of the institutions had no precautions against fire. Members of staff of the 93 institutions that had fire extinguishers did not know how to use them. There has been no training provided on how to use the fire fighting emergency equipment and no fire drills had been conducted.

Figure 6: Remains of what used to be the registry for Ministry of Education, Oshikoto Region



Figure 7: Remains of personnel records, Ministry of Education, Oshikoto Region



The picture painted above regarding the management of semi-current records in the public service of Namibia is very bleak. Necessitated by the need to change this picture, and because of the absence of in-house records centres for the public service, the National Archives of Namibia came up with a policy to enlist the services of commercial records centres. The purpose of the policy is to “regulate the use of private service-providers for the intermediate storage of records falling under the provisions of the Namibian Archives Act ...” (National Archives of Namibia, 2007, p. 1).

The policy takes cognisance of the following factors

- Records management in the Namibian Government Service and parastatal bodies has been inadequate over a prolonged period, resulting in a large amount of semi-current records which are inadequately organized and without proper disposal guidelines.
- The amount of semi-current records is by far exceeding the available storage space of the record-creating institutions, resulting in inadequate and insecure storage of records in cellars, corridors, disused and unguarded buildings.
- The National Archives of Namibia is geared towards the permanent storage of records (archives) of enduring value. It has no space for the storage of voluminous semi-current records available, nor has it got sufficient staff to maintain such records.
- Intermediate records depots for the storage of semi-current records, which are in principle mandated by the Archives Act, have not yet been established, and would require substantial capital investment as well as the creation of maintenance staff posts.
- The training needs of records management staff throughout government and parastatals exceed the training capacity of the existing National Archives staff component.
- Private service providers have established records storage facilities as well as digitization services and are offering such services and records management training to the private sector as well as to public institutions.
- The use of private service providers can be seen as a cost-effective alternative to the establishment of intermediate records depots (National Archives of Namibia, 2007, p.1).

The policy entrusts the commercial “records centres with many records management responsibilities.” The question is, “Are they equipped to carry them out?” This is what motivated the authors to conduct the study reported below.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the commercial records centres study was to establish their infrastructure, staffing and services. It also aimed to assess the extent to which they met the functions and characteristics of records centres. Based on the findings, the authors make recommendations to the National Archives regarding the establishment of in-house records centres for the public service of Namibia and inform it on the shortcoming of the commercial records centres so that they can be rectified to ensure the proper storage and management of the public records in their custody.

The findings and discussion

For the sake of anonymity, the records centres are not named but numbered from A-D in random order. The presentation of the findings is organised according to the following sub-headings:

Methodology

The multi case study of the four commercial records centres employed interviews and observation data collection techniques. Data was analysed using content analysis by identifying themes and presenting the data in tables and descriptive text.

- Staffing
- Services rendered

- Records storage
 - Implementation of retention schedules
 - Reference services
- Follow-up on records requested
- Measures to ensure that files are not reactivated
- Infrastructure
- Security measures
 - ✓ Measures against adverse environmental conditions
 - ✓ Fire prevention measures
 - ✓ Protection against unauthorised access
 - ✓ Records disaster preparedness plan
- Mechanisms to offer an economical service

Staffing

The quality of service offered by a records centre is to a large extent determined by the quality of its staff. Table 2 below presents the staff of the four records centres with their qualifications.

Table 2: Staffing in the four commercial records centres

| Records “Centre” | Total No. of Staff | No. of Staff with Professional Qualifications | Highest Professional Qualification |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|--|---|
| A | 7 | Non | Non |
| B | 22 | Non | Non |
| C | 51 | 3 | Masters |
| D | 29 | Non | Non |

The interviews revealed the following levels of staffing: records centre A had 7 members of staff; records centre B had 22 members; records centre C had 51, while records centre D had a total of 29. Only one of the four records centres had professionally qualified members of staff. Three members of staff from records centre A were pursuing diploma courses in archives and records management at the University of Namibia and the University of South Africa.

The National Archives’ policy on commercial records centres is weak in terms of what it prescribes regarding minimum specifications for staff. It merely states: “Qualification of staff to be evaluated; Security clearance procedures for staff; Oath of confidentiality”. If records are to be managed following best practices, the National Archives should prescribe some minimum professional qualifications which the records centres staff should have.

Services rendered

Besides the low-cost high density storage, it is the additional service that a records centre offers that distinguishes it from a mere secure clean warehouse. The level of service offered is subject to specific regulations, procedures and agreements. These should cover matters such as: the removal of semi-current and non-current records from current systems; the preparation of records for transfer; the arrangement and transfer of backlog accumulations of records; the provision of reference to records held at the records centre; the release and return of records used for reference purposes; and the destruction of records under the provision of the disposal schedule (International Records Management Trust, 1999).

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The study sought to find out among other things the services rendered by the private records centres to their clients. Records centres A, B and D only offered storage facilities to their clients. In addition to records storage, records centre C offered training and consultancy services. The training was in form of workshops i.e. records management level 1, records management level 2, records management level 3, electronic records management and records management for top managers. Records centre C's consultancy services included drawing up filing systems/classification schemes; electronic records management systems; designing storage facilities; formulating records management policies for their clients and records scanning.

Implementation of disposal Schedules

The research sought to find out whether the records centres have retention schedules of the creating agencies and whether there was any appraisal of records in their custody. The findings were that some private companies in all the four records centres had retention schedules that were applied when appraising records. However, all of the government institutions and regulated bodies in all four records centres had no retention schedules and as such no disposal takes place.

Transfer of records with permanent value to the National Archives.

The research sought to find out how frequent records of permanent value are transferred to the National Archives for permanent preservation. It was established that none of the four records centres has ever transferred records to the National Archives for permanent preservation.

Reference services rendered

The research also sought to find out the reference services that are offered to the clients. The findings were that members of staff from the records centres retrieve hard copies from repositories, scan them and fax the documents to their clients. This practice was found in all four records centres. However, they also deliver hard copies in some instances.

The research aimed at establishing whether the records centres offer an economic service by finding out whether they have high density storage facilities. The findings were that records centre A had more than 10 metres high density storage facility, records centre B had 6 metres high density storage facility, records centre C had a high density storage facility of 22.6 metres high with nine floors with one square metre accommodating 311 boxes. Records centre D had a 20 metres high density storage facility.

Purpose built records centres

The research aimed at finding out whether the records centres were purpose built or not. Records centres A and B were not purpose built, while records centres C and D were.

Security

The table below summarises the findings regarding security measures in the four records centres. Measures against adverse environmental conditions, fire, unauthorised access and disaster prevention were investigated.

Table 3: Internal and External Security Measures

| Records “Centre” | Mechanisms in place | | | |
|---------------------|---|--|--|--------------------------------------|
| | Measures against adverse environmental conditions (Poor to Very Good) | Fire prevention Measures (Poor to very Good) | Protection against unauthorized access (Poor to Very Good) | Disaster prevention plan (Y/N) |
| A | Poor | Very Good | Very Good | No |
| B | Very Good | Very Good | Very Good | Draft |
| C | Very Good | Very Good | Very Good | No |
| D | Poor | Very Good | Very Good | No |

Measures against adverse environmental conditions

At records centre A there were no measures in place to guard against adverse environmental conditions. The repository was however cleaned once a month. The roof at records centre B reflected/repelled heat, there were dust extractor fans and no electrical power/lights in the repository. Records centre C had a system of ventilation that cools the walls of the repository, no windows but ventilation openings to control dust and no electrical lights in the repository. Records centre D had no measures in place and had very bright fluorescent lights in the repository. In all the four records centres there were no humidity control measures.

Fire prevention measures

All four records centres had hand fire extinguishers that were regularly serviced. They all had up-to-date fire safety certificates from the Municipality of Windhoek and were inspected every 6 months. All of them had fire alarms and smoke detectors that were regularly serviced and connected to the City of Windhoek fire Brigade. None of the members of staff in all four records centres had been trained in the use of the fire fighting equipment.

External and Internal Security measures

Regarding the internal and external security measures in place to guard against burglary, arson and unauthorised access or request for records, the following were the findings: records centre A had security guards guarding the premises at night, CCTV cameras, access control system using finger prints and intruder alarms connected to a security company. Records centre B had a remote controlled gate, an electric fence monitored by a security company, intruder alarms and fire alarm wired to a security company but had no CCTV cameras. Records centre C had a fence around (not electrical), burglar alarms on the outside and inside connected to a security company, no windows, all doors were made of steel and there were CCTV cameras. Records centre D had an electrical fence, an electrical door with a code to access entry, and an intruder alarms connected to a security company.

All of them stored their records unmarked and randomly, with barcodes. It was also established that only authorised people could request for records from these records centres. All requests for records were through official email or fax.

Records disaster preparedness plans

Records are always potentially at risk of disaster. According to the State Records of South Australia (2007, p. 7) “most realistic interpretation of ‘disasters’ is to view them as dependent, not on the *scale* of damage, but on the *effect* that the incidents create”. Due to the importance of records, their loss in a disaster can be crippling for the responsible organisation. Records centers therefore need to offer complete protection of the records they store, even in the event of a disaster. In order to do so, they should have a disaster plan in place and participate in disaster contingency planning (Department of State, 1996, p. 17). The study therefore sought to find out whether the records centres have written records disaster preparedness plans in place. It was found out that records centre C has a draft which has been submitted to the National Archives for approval. Records centres A, B and D did not even have drafts and did not know when they would have them.

Volume/Quantity of records

The study wanted to establish the volumes of records in the custody of the records centres. It was established that records centre A is dealing had one client covered by the Archives Act, with a total of 94 000 records (current records). This amounts to 3630 boxes. Records centre B had 76 800 boxes, and two of their clients were covered by the Archives Act. These clients are referred to as E and F for the sake of anonymity. Client E had 627 boxes and client F 500 boxes. Records centre C had 135 clients, of which 11 were covered by the Archives Act. The records of the 11 regulated bodies amounted to 15066 boxes. Records centre D had a total of 16107 boxes; two of their clients (referred to as G and H) were covered by the Archives Act. Client G had 105 boxes while client H had 831 boxes. Records centre C sent statistics (list of records deposited by regulated bodies) to the National Archives regularly. The other 3 had never sent any statistics. The National Archives had no knowledge of the records the regulated bodies were depositing with these 3 records centres. This suggests lack of monitoring of how public service records are managed in the commercial records centres by the National Archives.

Frequency of deposits/acquisitions

Records centre A could not provide statistics of deposits. Records centre B received 100 boxes per day, 500 per week and 2000 per month on the average. Records centre C received 55 linear metres per day, 250 linear metres per month on the average and 1100 linear metres per month on the average. Records centres B, C and D said that they were all running out of space and were expanding their storage facilities.

Response time

Records centre A delivered records within 24 hours. Records centre B within 3 to 5 hours and Records centre C had three levels of service namely; express where the client got the record within two hours, standard service where the client got the record within 24 hours and emergency service where there was provision for after hours, holidays and weekends. Records management is about giving the right record, to right person at the right time. Timely response to records requests by records centres amongst other issues, such as security, is a must if they are to gain and maintain the trust of their clients.

Security of records in transit

The security measures expected from records centres for records at all times can be equated to the security measures expected of banks in terms of the money they keep. It is common practice for banks to put in place security measures when money is in transit. Records centres should also think along similar lines. Although they are not expected to

put in place stringent measures as those of the banks some protection is expected when records are moved. While records centres A, B and D delivered records in open normal vehicles, records centre C went an extra mile, by putting records in sealed envelopes and transporting them in a lockable vehicle with a GPS tracking system.

Follow up on records requested that have not been returned

All four records centres had manual and electronic mechanisms in place to track records that were out but had no control on their return as they have to rely on the creating agencies. It was established that some records never come back to the records centre. The implications of this are many, one of them being that series or files might lose records thereby destroying the integrity of the records. Records centres need to follow-up on records which are out on loan. This is one of the records keeping practices which distinguishes a mere warehouse and a professionally run records centre.

Measures to ensure that records are not reactivated

The study aimed at finding out whether the records centres ensure that files are not reactivated when they are on request with creating departments/institutions. In all the four institutions, it was reported that many files had had documents added when they came back, and some never came back at all. A records centre should advise on these basic but pertinent records keeping issues. This is only possible if the staff working in these records centres are well versed with proper records keeping practices. As the study established, most of the staff were not trained and skilled to provide such advice.

Conclusions and recommendations

The paper has highlighted the poor management of semi-current records in the public service of Namibia. The need for proper facilities for the storage of semi-current records cannot be overemphasised. There is no doubt that records required for evidence and for future research are perishing in the creators' offices. The dumping of records in unsecure storage areas makes them irretrievable and susceptible to theft, vandalism and damage by environmental factors. The absence of retention schedules as identified by the records surveys conducted by the National archives and other studies hinder records appraisal, resulting in congestion and space shortages and haphazard destruction of records. These authors support the recommendations emanating from the National Archives records survey findings that institutions come up with approved retention and disposals schedules.

The National Archives needs to prioritise its plans to establish records centres to manage semi-current records. The accumulation of semi current records will be controlled and office space will be economically utilized. It will also help to decongest offices and store rooms. Sixteen regulated bodies were found to be utilising the services of the private records centres. Although the commercial records centres have helped ease storage space to a certain extent, it is clear from the findings of this study that they are not at the present moment meeting a number of the characteristics of records centres which are required for an efficient and economic service as well as preservation of the records. Driven by the need to cut costs, and shortage of trained and skilled manpower, it will be a while before they meet the necessary requirements. The commercial records "centre" route taken by the public service should be seen more as a temporary measure than a permanent solution. In future once the government records centres are established, the commercial records centres can co-exist and collaborate. In the meantime the National Archives need to revise the policy on commercial records centres and ensure that the commercial records centres have qualified and skilled personnel. The policy should also be clear on the monitoring mechanisms and these should be implemented.

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No matter how security conscious and careful organisations are, disasters can occur. The public service, as well as the commercial records centres must be encouraged to come up with records disaster preparedness plans.

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