

## Missing records and service delivery in the public-sector organization, Zimbabwe

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### **Abstract**

*The study focused on the effects of missing records on service delivery of a public-sector organization in Zimbabwe. The purpose of the study was to investigate why and how records went missing and establish the consequences of such anomalies. Using a census approach the researchers employed both qualitative and quantitative research techniques to gather data from a population that comprised 22 officers. Data were collected using questionnaires, interviews and observations. The key findings were that files went missing due to failure or delays in sending files to the records office, inefficiency in file tracking, corruption and also due to the absence of records management policies and procedures. This impacted on service delivery in that decisions were not made at the right time prompting some delays. Consequently, the study recommended that action officers should adhere to records movement principles; the organization should make use of modern security measures, records management policies and procedures; staff training and file tracking mechanisms to deal with the issue of missing files.*

**Key words:** Public sector, missing records, records, records management, service delivery;

### **Introduction**

Records are important organizational assets as they foster transparency, accountability and informed decision-making (Chinyemba and Ngulube, 2005; Shepherd and Yeo, 2003) yet cases of missing records in the public sector in Zimbabwe are not new (Dewah & Mutula, 2015). Cases of missing and lost records in public offices may be caused by loose systems and poor records management practices in the main stream government (Musembi, 2005) and when records are kept loosely, accountability and transparency may be compromised in the discharge of duty (Mutsagondo, 2012). Files can also go missing if they are not classified and filed appropriately. The timely and accurate retrieval of records depend largely upon how well records are classified

or organised (Kalusopa & Ngulube, 2012) and filing is one way an organization can cope with the vast amount of documents which have to be kept for future reference (Obeng-Amoako, 2016).

Musembi (2005) attributes the issue of missing files to corruption and laxity among public servants and further suggests that the consequences of missing files are corruption, inability to retrieve records and time wastage in identifying and tracking records. Other root causes of corruption is the lack of good records keeping practices and failure by government to institute measures that will ensure records are well managed (Mnjama, 2003). Corruption is a serious problem in Zimbabwe and the country is among the worst corrupt in Southern Africa (Corruption Perception Index, 2012). Okello-Obura (2012) posited that corrupt officials sometimes arrange for files to disappear but where there are stringent record management practices, disappearance or loss of important documents is less pronounced.

The Directorate of Public Service Management of Botswana (DPSM) (1993) recommends that a file census should be conducted by the registry staff whereby they visit all offices and note titles and reference numbers of every file found. File audits are important as they help officers to confirm the location of files that are not in the record's office (Roper and Millar, 1999). Smead (2017) states that when a folder is not in its place in the filing system, it does not mean it has been lost or misfiled but may be in someone's office. File movement slips can be used in an environment where paper based records are used and this promotes accountability in that as soon as records staff receive the file movement slip, the information is recorded on the transit sheet or if its electronic records management system, details of the new user of the file are checked in the computer (Roper and Millar 1999). File tracking involves making a follow up on files so as to determine their location at any given time.

Proper training and skills development can also be relied upon to deal with cases of missing files. Records offices staff are expected to have been trained but many public registries in Zimbabwe are managed by lower level staff, some with only four years of secondary education (Tsvuura & Mutsagondo, 2015). In addition to acquiring college and university courses, Mutsagondo (2012) asserts that records officers should be continuously developed from time to time in order to keep abreast of changing trends in the field.

Regarding security of records Nepean (2013) notes that though most paper records are usually kept in lockable cupboards or drawers when not in use in many cases, third parties have access to offices where records are stored, hence vulnerable to diverse threats. In DPSM's (1993) view, security of current records is a complicated, but necessary process, which involves an assessment of how secure the records need to be. Security should also consider things like locks, windows with burglar bars, closed circuit television (CCTV), automatic security alarms, keys, which act as physical security measures on records (State of Florida, 2009).

Missing files result in a number of adverse effects for both the organisation and the clients that it serves. Some of the costly results include poor service delivery to the citizens (Musembi, 2005) financial losses, damage to brand reputation, that is, people lose trust in the organization, costly

litigation, job losses and total business inoperability, employees may waste precious hours looking for missing records (DPSM 1993), ghost workers, negatively affecting expenditure (Roper and Millar, 1999). Poor decision making can also be caused by absence of important records in an organisation.

### **Contextual setting**

For the purposes of maintaining the privacy and mutual respect and mutual understanding between the researchers and the public sector under study this paper withheld the name of the government department. This study was conducted at provincial level of a government or public sector department which is in the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development in Zimbabwe. The public organisation has five regional offices, which are Harare, Mutare, Masvingo, Bulawayo and Gweru. The public sector has the Administration, Registry, Library sections and its mandate is to register and supervise apprenticeship training programs, trade testing and certificating skilled workers. The Administration section is responsible for the management of finances and human resource issues at the provincial level and there are eight officers there, while the library provides books and other forms of literature to the members in order to enrich themselves. The Registry is where records are kept and managed. The Registry of this organisation is manned by two officers only. In its day to day operation the department generates both paper and electronic records. Paper records that are kept by the institution include policy files, personnel files for apprentices and trade test candidates, contracts of those undergoing apprenticeship training, certificates for those who have completed their training, duplicate files for those who have accomplished training, current personal staff files. Miller (2005) dealt with the issues of missing files, specifically touching on how this impacted on the health delivery system where pregnant mothers and their children were vulnerably exposed. This study, though benefiting from Miller's study, addressed the issue not from a health perspective but from an educational perspective as the public department is a higher and tertiary education institution where poor records management has dealt a blow to apprenticeship and trade testing records and examination results.

### **Statement of the problem**

Missing records may bring untold suffering and frustration of citizens. Despite records fostering transparency, accountability and sound decision-making (Roper and Millar, 1999), there have been cases of missing and misfiled records in many public departments in Zimbabwe (Matangira, 2016; Dewah and Mutula, 2015). This has resulted in departments failing to fully pursue their mandate as records of administrative value would be inaccessible. Anecdotal evidence based on the observation of one of the authors who was an employee of this organisation seems to suggest that this scenario was also reported to the Provincial Head of the organization that is under study, prompting the researchers to carry out this study. The purpose of this study was to seek answers on why and how records went missing, and how records got misfiled and what the consequences of such anomalies were. Specifically, the study sought to address the following research questions:

1. What are the causes of missing files at the training department?
2. What are the levels of staff training or expertise in records management practices?
3. How secure are records at the training department?

4. Which file tracking system is in place at the training department?
5. What are the consequences of missing files on service delivery and departmental administration at the training department?

### **Methodology**

The study used a census approach where both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used and a questionnaire was administered to a population of 22 officers. Williamson and Bow (2006) and Ngulube (2005) hold that there is little rationale in sampling populations of less than 50 units and 100 units respectively. The researchers sought authorisation from the Provincial Head and once authorisation was obtained, the researchers distributed questionnaires to all respondents and made follow-ups on them within a week. Participants included the provincial head, staff from the administration (finance and personnel) and Records personnel from the Registry. While questionnaires were the main data collection tool, interviews and observations were used to triangulate findings from interviews. Interview responses as well as observation notes were jotted in the researcher's notebook from where the data was later synthesised for data presentation and discussion. Eighteen respondents completed questionnaires and this gave a response rate of 82%. The other staff members (4:18%) could not participate in the study since they were on ordinary and sick leave. The three interviewees (two records officers, and one Provincial Head) were purposively sampled based on their active role in the creation, receipt, use, maintenance, preservation and disposal of records. Data were analysed thematically, where research questions were used as themes. According to Ngulube (2015), thematic data analysis is whereby themes or sub-themes are identified in a study and findings of the study are analysed under each one of them.

### **Findings and Discussions**

#### **Causes of missing files**

When asked about the causes of missing files the Provincial Head stated that "*the department has experienced cases and incidents of missing files and records that included candidates' files, test scripts, examiners' claim forms and accounts records such as payment vouchers.*" Five officers from the Administration (Finance and department) also concurred that cases of missing files were not new in the department. Respondents were asked to show their degree of agreement or disagreement to suggested causes of missing files. Table 1 shows the results.

**Table 1: Degree of agreement or disagreement with suggested causes of missing files**

Causes	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Records are not forwarded in time to records office for filing	4 (22%)	5 (28%)	6 (33%)	3 (17%)	–
Files are not actioned on time	4 (22%)	9 (50%)	1 (6%)	4 (22%)	–
Action officers do not return files on time	6 (33%)	11(61%)	1 (6%)	–	–
Corruption	–	3 (17%)	6 (33%)	5 (28%)	4 (22%)
Failure to adhere to records management policies and procedures	6 (33%)	8 (44%)	–	4 (22%)	–
Action Officers overstay with files	5 (28%)	9 (50%)	4 (22%)	–	–
Frosty relations at work	2 (11%)	7 (39%)	1 (6%)	8 (44%)	–
Records not being tracked appropriately	1 (6%)	6 (33%)	3 (17%)	6 (33%)	2 (11%)
No tracking mechanism	1 (6%)	2 (11%)	3 (17%)	9 (50%)	3 (17%)
Records misfiled	–	3 (17%)	2 (11%)	10(56%)	3 (17%)
Records stolen	–	4 (22%)	2 (11%)	9 (50%)	3 (17%)

Source: field data, 2017

The fact that 9(50%) respondents were in the Agree categories shows that generally, action officers (who use records for decision-making) contributed much to files getting lost because they took time to forward them to the records office for filing. There is need to timely classify records and file them appropriately to enhance safe storage, preservation and retrievability (Roper and Millar,1999;Bradsher, 1988) while coping with the vast amounts of documents which have to be kept for future reference (Obeng-Amoako, 2016).

Closely related to the issue of forwarding records to the records office was the issue of returning files late to the same office. Seventeen (94%) respondents strongly saw the late returning of files as a cause of missing files. It was also revealed that action officers overstayed with files. Fourteen (78%) agreed that the action officers’ overstaying with files was a cause of such file getting missing. Personal observations also showed that there were cases where files overstayed in the offices of actioning officers. The researchers found files which were two weeks and five weeks old in two action officers’ rooms. Thus, action officers are to be blamed for missing files. In this regard Kalusopa and Ngulube (2012) hold that the timely return of records for filing helped much in making sure the records were secured against loss or theft.

During separate interviews the Provincial head and the two records officers concurred that the longer the files stayed in the offices of actioning officers, the higher the probability of them getting lost. Through negligence and the failure to stick to the “clear desk policy”, important records ended

up mingled with other papers and may be thrown in waste paper baskets as trash. Norton (2010) opines that ‘a clear desk policy’ is recommended in offices where files and other paper documentation are locked away at the end of each working day. Personal observations also confirmed this as the researchers noted that some offices were clogged with paper records. Even the in and out-trays were full and some had papers over-spilling. Some offices had papers on floors and in card board boxes, which was a recipe for disaster.

### **Corrupt practices**

The study investigated the issue of corruption and theft as causes of missing files at this organization. The results revealed that only 3 (17%) respondents, blamed corruption as a cause of missing files. Six (33%) respondents were neutral, 9 (50%) disagreed. Okello-Obura (2012) and Musembi (2005) see corruption as one other cause of missing files. During the interview, one records officer alleged that “*there were unsubstantiated cases where some staff members in the organisation hid student files so that students could pay them to locate the files and have their files processed*”. Mnjama (2003) also sees poor records management practices as a contributing factor to corruption. Thus, cases of missing records due to corruption cannot be very surprising in Zimbabwe considering that the Corruption Index of Zimbabwe puts the country’s range among the most corrupt in the world (Corruption Perception Index, 2012). Related to the issue of corruption was the issue of file thefts. Only four (22%) agreed that files went missing because of theft. While 2(11%) were neutral, 12 (67%) disagreed. Researchers observed that theft of files could occur in the Registry because of rather relaxed access controls as well as in action officers’ rooms where even important files were left lying on desks for days during and after use of the records.

### **Policies and procedures**

Missing files were also blamed on failure to adhere to records management policies and procedures with 14 (78%) respondents agreeing, while 4(22%) disagreed. Chinyemba and Ngulube (2005) note that records policies, rules and procedures are hardly adhered to, yet policy outlines what should be done while procedure outlines how it should be done. Thus, they maintain that if records policies and procedures are floated, the aim and objectives of any records management programme can hardly be met. During the interview, records officer A, indicated that “*as a Records and Information Assistant I would admit that there is no known Records Management policy or Records Management manual that exist at our department currently, although I am told that it once existed.*” In the absence of policies and procedures and the failure to adhere to them, the issue of records getting lost is set to continue to haunt organisations like this one.

The issue of records management policy and procedures featured prominently. Two records officers held that since everyone in the organization at some point created, received or used a record, it was a collective responsibility of all to adhere to records management policies and procedures. The majority (17:94%) of respondents agreed that the records management policy and procedures manuals were important documents which if properly used would lessen the recurrence of missing files within the organisation.

### **File tracking**

It also emerged that the issue of file tracking and file tracking mechanism contributed to cases of missing files at this organisation. Seven (39%) respondents agreed that files went missing because they were not tracked properly while 3 (17%) were neutral, 8(44%) disagreed. It seemed files were not tracked properly even though there was a computerised file tracking mechanism whereby a record is tracked by logging in the details of the file, for instance, an apprentice number, identity number or the surname and first name. Clicking on the system it leads to the transmittal history where the file was checked out to, date, by whom and displays all the history of the movement from the time of the creation of the database. The majority of respondents expressed that a file tracking mechanism was in place in this organisation. A total of 12 (67%) respondents indicated that a tracking mechanism was in place while only three (17%) claimed such did not exist and three (17%) remained neutral. Use of file movement slips enhances file tracking (Roper and Millar, 1999) and whenever a file leaves the registry, a relevant card should be made for every file and should include the name and the number of the file (DPSM, 1993).

Though the file tracking system existed in the organization 13 (72%) respondents observed that the system in use was not efficient while 5 (28%) indicated that it was efficient. As follow-up questions, respondents were asked who was responsible for moving files from office to office within the organization. Sixteen (89%), indicated that file movement was efficient and 2(11%) respondents were concerned that files were passed from one officer to the next without necessarily passing through the records office. However, observations showed that sometimes office assistants delayed in collecting and forwarding files and this sometimes caused confusion in the department as some action officers ended up doing the task themselves. During the interview, the Provincial Head, saw the situation differently as he claimed that *“the Records Office now use an electronic tracking system, but I note with regret that internet and databases glitches could go for three months and this meant that during that whole period, the department was without an electronic file tracking system”*. Commenting on file tracking, Nicholas et al (2014) notes that whatever tracking system is used; it should ensure that all file movements are traceable.

### **Staff’s work relations**

The issue of frosty or poor working relations amongst workers in this organization was cited as a cause of missing records. Interviewee A alleged that *“some workers had personal differences and grudges. At some point, one worker deliberately misplaced a record as a way of fixing his or her perceived enemy.”* It was indicated during the interviews that such problems were mainly encountered in the Accounts and Administration sections. Hostile or poor staff relations are not new in organisations and have adverse effects on records management such as sabotaging the work of others. Such sabotage could involve theft or misfiling of records. Mutsagondo (2017) noted that management of electronic records was poorly executed because of hostile relations between records and information technology officers who tended to operate independently as well as in competition to one another.

### **Dealing with cases of missing and misplaced files in the organisation**

Respondents were asked to confirm or otherwise whether records were important resource in this organisation. All 18 (100%) respondents agreed that records were important organizational resources. As such, they suggested varying means and ways of preventing files from getting lost or misplaced within the organization. Six (33%) indicated that there ought to be a file tracking mechanism, with two advocating for a computerized tracking system which they saw as more effective compared to a manual tracking system. Three (17%) respondents called for an improvement in the filing system, another three (17%) called for Action Officers to timely return files to the records office, one (6%) averred for all staff to follow proper records management procedures, another one (6%) suggested the timely forwarding of files to the records office, while one (6%) insisted on the improvement in internal controls, another one (6%) called for improvements in the physical security of the records office and another one (6%) called for an improvement in staff and working relations amongst officers in this organisation. Only one (6%) respondent expressed she had no idea about how the issue of missing files could be dealt with.

It seems the case of records getting missing is slowly being resolved. During the interview the provincial head indicated that *“there were measures in place such as introducing a register for examiner’s claim forms, for accounts records and all records from the accounts office were transferred to the Registry and placed in a lockable cabinet. A register was also introduced to record all records that would be borrowed by the Accounts staff and was meant to be signed for.”* However, resistance to change has been noted in organizational behaviour studies as a stumbling block to changes and innovation (Mutsagondo (2017) citing Marutha and Ngulube (2012); Lunenburg (2010).

### **Levels of staff training or expertise in records management**

During the interview, it emerged that there were only two (11%) of the entire workforce who were qualified records officers while 16 (89%) were qualified in other areas like administration, accounting, human resources, technical and purchasing management. All 18 (100%) respondents agreed that all officers were supposed to attend records management workshops including the provincial head, technical staff, administration staff, manpower training staff, accounting and office staff. Such training would go a long way in equipping all staff with basic skills like records handling, preservation, filing, file tracking and being aware of the importance and central role of the records office within an organisation.

It was amazing to note that 16 (89%) had never attended any records management workshop despite the role they played in working with records, while two (11%) respondents had in the past attended a records management workshop. Of the two who had attended workshops, one was from the registry and the other one was from the administration section. During the interview, the Provincial Head indicated that *“because of financial challenges, staff in this organization had failed to attend a number of records workshops in the offing”* but indicated that *“records staff have not yet attended public service’ mandatory training in classification and records procedures”*. The provincial head’s views corroborate with Matangira (2016) who observed that financial challenges in Zimbabwe had tremendously affected the institution of archiving resulting in the country recording negative returns in records management. Nevertheless, the provincial head



said, “*it could have been a good thing if all officers in the organization attended such workshops because virtually all staff members worked with records in one way or another*”. The issue of skills or lack of them is a major concern in the area of records management. Public registries in Zimbabwe are managed by lower level staff, some with only four years of secondary education (Tsvuura & Mutsagondo, 2015). In the case of the organization under study the two records officers had National Diploma qualifications. Mutsagondo (2017) notes that the profession of records management was usually wrongly looked down upon, resulting in management and some action officers failing to take instructions by records officers concerning the professional manner in which records were supposed to be managed. This could explain why some action officers did not return files to the registry or return them in time.

### **Security measures to secure records**

Files could go missing because security measures were not up to standard in this organisation. A total of 15 (83%) respondents pointed out that security of records was at stake because the only major security measure was the use of lockable cabinets yet some records were filed on open steel shelves. Security of records is a central issue in records management. Records should be secured against human and non-human threats and that cupboard, cabinets and drawers should be lockable and should also be in secured rooms (Nepean, 2013).

When asked about authorized access to the records office 9 (50%) of respondents said there was no restriction of access into the records office but 9(50% ) claimed that the records office was for authorized staff only. The head of the institution claimed that “*the registry is supposed to be a restricted place though I have witnessed cases of officers from other sections freely accessing the registry which could compromise safety and security of records.*” Researchers observed that although there was a “No Entry to Unauthorized Staff” tag on the registry’s door, officers in this organization could still knock and gain access into the registry. There was no serving desk or counter which barred unauthorized personnel to reach the shelves and desks of records officers. This compromised security of records. Shepherd and Yeo (2003) hold that records offices should consider a number of security measures that include camera circuit television, automatic security alarms and biometric access.

### **Consequences of missing files on service delivery and departmental administration**

Cases of missing files in the organization under study were not uncommon. Eleven (61%) respondents indicated that they had at one point failed to locate a file that they needed in conducting their duties. Only 7(39%) respondents claimed that they had never failed to access files that they needed to use. Administration officers (Finance and Personnel) claimed cases of missing files seemed more common in their section than in any other sections. It emerged that missing files affected decision making on examination results, delayed payments of examiners and other things, students results are delayed, audit cannot be carried out effectively, candidates lose confidence and trust in the public organisation, this leads to strains relations with examiners. Equally important is the fact that legal procedures and administrative functions are affected. Missing files thus can virtually incapacitate an organization resulting in ad hoc and impromptu decisions being made.

Such decisions normally do not produce the best results. Musembi (2005) posits that managers and action officers rely on records to make decisions. When such records are disorganized or unavailable, it leads to poor decision-making and decision-taking, resulting in organizations failing to meet their mandates, in municipality offices where citizens may not be billed correctly due to missing records and states that this situation may lead to poor governance (Musembi, 2005).

It also emerged that missing files affected processing of students' examination results. The department examines tertiary education students and conducts trade tests. Thus, if records go missing, examination results cannot be processed. This had ripple effects, for example, some students lost faith in the Higher Education Examinations Council (HEXCO) and chose to study through other examination boards. This meant loss of business to competitors. The Provincial Head expressed that *"missing records had ripple effects as they resulted in lost job opportunities for students as missing scripts will delay processing of trade test results. Thus, clients did not take such cases lightly."* This corroborates Musembi (2005) who rightly claims that one of the costly results of poor record-keeping practices is poor service to the citizens.

The Provincial Head revealed that, *"missing files resulted in examiners getting paid late. This had ripple effects in that it poisoned relations with examiners. Some examiners had already resigned from participating in the exercise because of payment frustrations."* The Provincial Head, records officers and administration officers agreed that they had problems before with external examiners who could not be paid in time because their claim forms were missing. This tarnished the image of the department as well as that of the parent ministry and the examination board for technical and tertiary education in Zimbabwe.

One Records Officer indicated that, *"a lot of time is wasted in looking for missing files"*. One administration officer and one records officer recounted how they had to search room by room for a file, only to find the file on one officer's in-tray after five days. Musembi (2005) asserts that missing or misplaced records, result in employees wasting precious time looking for such records. This in turn affects public service delivery, production and productivity.

Failure to carry out internal audits was cited as another result of missing files within an organisation. During the interview, the Provincial Head pointed out that *"financial records like bank statements, bank deposits, payment records, purchase records and end of year financial statements are needed in auditing. If they cannot be located, internal audits cannot be carried out. This means a lot within the organization in as far as accountability and transparency are concerned."* Records have fiscal or financial value (Daniels 1988) to foster transparency and accountability within an organization.

## **Conclusions**

The article is based on the study that aimed at investigating the effects of missing records on the service delivery and other operations of a public-sector department in Zimbabwe. The study concluded that the causes of missing files in the organisation included the failure by records officers to action files in time, inefficiencies in the file tracking system, theft of records, corruption

and the failure to adhere to records management policies and procedures. There were only two records officers who were qualified in records management yet the rest of the staff members created, used and maintained records although they were not trained in managing records. Security of records is a matter of concern within the public sector. It was discovered that there was poor physical security of records as access into the registry was unrestricted. It emerged that an online-connected file tracking system was in place and traditional manual tracking system was used sparingly when there were Internet glitches. Cases of missing files negatively affected both students and examiners, who would be waiting for their results and payment respectively leading to loss of confidence and trust.

### **Recommendations**

In view of the findings and conclusions the study recommended the following:

The organisation needs to address the issue of professional management of records through records policy that covers records management procedural guidelines for creation, use, filing, retrieval, access, preservation, retention, disposal, security and media as well as the procedures manual that spells out what time an Action Officer should spend with a record/file before returning it to the Registry.

Staff training (through workshops, seminars, short presentations) in the basics of records management in this organization should be mandatory to all staff (top and middle management, administration section and others) since everyone is involved in creating, receiving, using records within the department.

There is need to introduce modern security measures like camera circuit television (CCTV), alarms and biometric access controls to protect records from theft. Screen doors and burglar bars should be installed at the records office and the registry should be a strictly prohibited area and stern security measures should be put in place.

The study recommends that file movement slips and file transit sheets be used to avoid passing files from one official to another without registering them at the records office. It is recommended that files with pending issues be sent to records office for diarisation and not to be kept in offices. Action officers should release files within three days after receiving them.

It is recommended that the records office staff should have a tracking manual system in place that will replace the computerized system whenever the system is down. The study also recommends the adoption and use of an electronic records management system to assist in the tracking and general management of the organizational records

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