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Sub-theme addressed: Access to information

Topic

Disposal of electronic records and the electronic records' access time bomb in Zimbabwe

by

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Abstract

Records, in whatever format, are created, preserved and used primarily for administrative, fiscal, legal and evidential purposes. In addition, records are secondarily used for research purposes. Thus, the preservation of valuable records, for current and future reference is called for. According to ICA (2004:59), the provision of access is the ultimate objective of record-keeping. Similarly, Mnjama and Wamukoya (2006:281) hold that retention is useless without accessibility. While provisions and policies are in place for the disposal of paper records in Zimbabwe, none explicitly exist for electronic records, a situation which has resulted in haphazard, unprocedural and uncoordinated disposal of electronic records in public departments. An electronic information access time bomb is ticking, a situation Ngulube (2012:114) argues would lead to “digital amnesia and the digital dark-age”. While this is the *status quo*, the constitution of Zimbabwe guarantees its citizens the right to access public information. Thus, the failure to professionally dispose electronic records negatively impacts on access to the same, implying the public service is shooting itself in the foot. This qualitative study sought to examine how current electronic records disposal practices impacted upon access to electronic information in the future. The study made use of a multiple case study research design which involved 16 government ministries in the Midlands province of Zimbabwe. Data were collected using interviews, observation and document reviews. The study was undertaken between 2015 and 2016 and it revealed that most public officers disposed electronic records willy-nilly in line with their intuition, skills and available resources. This resulted in the premature, unauthorised and wanton destruction of valuable electronic records. Such disposal practices compromised future access to electronic information, the antithesis of the National Archives of Zimbabwe Act (1986), the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (2002) and Section 62 of the 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe. The study recommended the crafting of an enforceable electronic records disposal policy by the National Archives of Zimbabwe which fully supports an electronic information access policy. Public records officers were also urged to acquire electronic records management skills.

Key words: access, electronic records, electronic records disposal, electronic records management, Midlands province, Zimbabwe

1.0 Introduction and background to the study

This study examined how electronic records were disposed in public departments in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe and how this impacted on future access to electronic information. Midlands Province is one of the ten administrative provinces of Zimbabwe and comprises of eight districts namely, Chirumanzu, Gokwe North, Gokwe South, Gweru, Kwekwe, Mberengwa, Shurugwi and Zvishavane and the province has a population of 1 614 941 people (Census Provincial Report- Midlands: 2012). The National Archives Act (1986) defines public departments as government ministries, government departments, subsidiary bodies and local authorities. This study was only restricted to government ministries in the Midlands province.

Hayes (2011); Penn, Morddel and Smith (1989:4); Bradsher and Pacifico (1988:18) hold that records have been created over centuries using different formats like clay tablets, papyrus, parchment, leather, wood, bamboo slips, silk and stone tablets and paper. The most recent records format is electronic format which has risen to prominence due to the rise of electronic government in many developing countries.

Lipchak and McDonald (2003:1) define electronic government as the use of information and communication technologies to enable government to deliver its programmes and services to citizens and clients effectively and efficiently. According to Hafkin (2009:3), electronic government dawned in Africa in 1996 following the African ministers' Africa Information Society Initiative which passed a resolution that Africa was supposed to resort to use of information and communication technologies to improve effectiveness of government service delivery. Electronic government was introduced in Zimbabwe in 2011 (Jumira 2011:1; Mambo 2011:1) with the country hoping to become digital by 2015 and at the same time promote the use of information and communication technologies from the highest office in government to grassroots level. The following developments prior to and after 2011 helped to reinforce electronic government in Zimbabwe; the establishment of the department of Central Services Computing in 1972 which provided a central computer facility to all government ministries and departments (Nkala, Ngulube and Mangena (2012:96), the deregulation of the telecommunications sector which ended the then Post and Telecommunications Corporation monopoly of the information and communication technologies' industry (which resulted in more

players flooding the information and communication technologies' industry) (National ICT Policy 2012:21), crafting of the National Information and Communication Technology Policy in 2007, establishment of the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology in 2009, the removal of duty on information and communication technologies' hardware and software, increased Internet penetration rate in the country and the ever-increasing computerisation of government departments.

1.1 Research problem

The future of electronic documentary heritage in Zimbabwe hangs in the balance due to the haphazard, uninformed and irresponsible manner in which electronic records are disposed (Mutsagondo 2017:122). While provisions and policies are in place for the disposal of paper records in Zimbabwe, none explicitly exist for electronic records. This has resulted in the failure to transfer semi-current electronic records into archival custody as well as the willy-nilly destruction of electronic records, developments that directly affect the future of electronic documentary heritage. Ngulube (2012:114) regards such a scenario as a time bomb which may lead to digital amnesia and the digital dark-age. Yet as the International Council on Archives [ICA] (2004:59) argues, the provision of access is the ultimate objective of record-keeping. Similarly, Mnjama and Wamukoya (2006:281) hold that acquisition and retention of records without accessibility is useless. Thus, the failure to professionally dispose electronic records negatively impacts on access to the same, implying that Zimbabwe's public service is shooting itself in the foot.

1.2 Aim and objectives of the study

The study assessed how disposal of electronic records in public departments affects access to electronic information in Zimbabwe in the future. The objectives of the study were:

- To outline how electronic records are disposed in public departments in Zimbabwe.
- To assess how disposal of electronic records impacts on access to electronic information in Zimbabwe in the future.

2.0 Literature review and theoretical framework

The study interrogated literature on disposal of electronic records which entails destruction as well as transfer of electronic records to permanent preservation. It also accessed literature on access to electronic records and made reference to access to paper records for comparative purposes. However, the study firstly addresses the theoretical framework which informed the study, that is, the intergenerational equity theory.

2.1 Intergenerational equity theory

According to Weiss (1989 and 1992), the Intergenerational Equity Theory advocates for fairness amongst the past, present and future generations in terms of how they access natural and cultural heritage. The theory advances that the earth must be safeguarded for the benefit of the present and future generations through careful planning and management. One of the natural and cultural resources that should be carefully managed for the benefit of future generations is access to records in electronic form. Chaterera (2015) holds it is not rational to prefer one generation over another since to favour the present generation to access records at the expense of future generations or to compromise the present generation in favour of future generations contradicts the precepts of the Intergenerational Equity Theory. Thus, records, information and archival officers need to safeguard records, information and archives in whatever format, for example, paper, electronic or audio-visual) by enhancing their preservation, disposal and access for both the present and future generations. In the context of this study, records officers in public departments should properly and professionally dispose electronic records for the benefit of present and future generations. Irresponsible, premature and uninformed destruction and transfer of electronic records negates the Intergenerational Equity Theory as future generations will be subjected to digital amnesia and the dark age (Ngulube 2012:114) in as far as availability of electronic documentary heritage is concerned. Citing the International Council on Archives (2001), Chaterera (2015) holds that the International Council on Archives' 5th Principle on access to archives states that archives should be accessible to both present and future generations on equal and fair terms. Such archives include electronic records of value that may be unprocedurally destroyed or transferred in Zimbabwe's public service today.

2.2 Disposal of electronic records

Disposal of records entails destruction and transfer of records to permanent storage (ICA 2008:21). While there are well-laid out rules for destruction and transfer of paper records in many countries, disposal of electronic records is rather ad hoc. According to Wright (1997:11), records in all media, including electronic media, should not be destroyed without appropriate official authorisation. Yet as Nasieku (2012) notes, disposal of electronic records on the computer is mainly done through sending the record to the re-cycle bin, especially for purposes of freeing space on computer memory. She further notes that the same was sometimes done on storage devices to make space for new business, regardless of the importance of the record in the future. Mutsagondo and Tsvuura (2015) hold that in provincial public departments in Zimbabwe, there was a 68% premature destruction of electronic mail records due to lack of proper electronic records disposal policies and procedures. Ngoepe and van der Walt (2009:1) note that the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa lacked infrastructure to store and preserve electronic records. Nkala, Ngulube and Mangena (2012:99) hold that a similar situation prevailed in Zimbabwe. This situation left public departments in both countries disposing electronic records as they pleased.

2.3 Access to electronic records

Millar (2009:52) defines access as the right, opportunity, means of finding, using, or retrieving information. She further argues that by this definition, access can be a right or an opportunity, depending on the circumstances. As noted by ICA (2004:59), the provision of access is the ultimate objective of record-keeping. Mnjama and Wamukoya (2006:281) citing a special report by Kahn Consulting (2004:7) also tow the same line arguing that retention is useless without accessibility. Sejane (2004:45) claims that records are valuable if they can be found when needed for action or reference. Like the case with paper records, there is need for organisations to determine who accesses the organisation's electronic records and who does not (Millar 2009:1). Mnjama and Wamukoya (2006:282) opine that accessibility should not only be for government officials, but also members of the public in accordance with freedom of access laws and subject to approved closure periods. Issues of access should be balanced against many factors like security, the law, ethics and preservation.

Wright (1997:14) notes that many organisations world-wide were familiar with providing access to paper records, but now the same access was supposed to be extended to electronic records. He argues that if information is stored on a video or audio tape, the organisation is supposed to provide a copy of the tape, if such is the request, or give the requester the opportunity to listen to or view the tape. Access to electronic records is a matter of concern. Ngoepe and van der Walt (2009:1) opine that provision of access to electronic records is a major challenge around the globe.

Keakopa (2008) observes that many countries guarantee their citizens the right to access information. In Zimbabwe, access to information, in whatever format, is guaranteed by the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (2002), the National Archives Act (1986) as well as the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013). The Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (2002) states that every citizen of Zimbabwe has a right to access whatever information that is in the custody of any public organisation. The National Archives Act (1986) section 9 sub-sections (a) and (b) gives every citizen of Zimbabwe the right to access information in whatever format, held by the National Archives of Zimbabwe or by any ministry. Section 62 sub-section 1 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe states that “every Zimbabwean citizen or permanent resident, including juristic persons and the Zimbabwean media, has the right of access to any information held by the State or by any institution or agency of government at every level, in so far as the information is required in the interests of public accountability”. Despite all this, Millar (2009:51) observes that such guarantees of access to information are only in principle as many countries in the world today seem not to give their citizens such rights.

3.0 Research methodology

The study used a qualitative research approach. According to Shenton (2004:63) qualitative research is commonly used in the social sciences to unearth trends, discover new knowledge and validate existing knowledge. The study used a multi-case study research design as it examined electronic records disposal practices of 22 government ministries in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe, which comprised the population of the study. Data were collected using interviews, observation and document reviews, methods which are commonly used in qualitative research. Four officers were selected for interviews from each of the 22 ministries

using purposive sampling. These were the records and information management officer, information technology officer, administration officer and the head of government ministry. Out of a possible 88 informants, 55 were interviewed, making a response rate of 62.5%. Data were thematically analysed in accordance with the two objectives of the study.

4.0 Findings of the study

4.1 Disposal of electronic records

For purposes of closer study, the issue of electronic records disposal was divided into two, that is, transfer of electronic records and destruction of electronic records.

4.1.1 Electronic records transfer

Under normal circumstances, public departments in Zimbabwe transfer semi-current paper records to records centres for secondary storage. These records are kept in the records centre for varying periods depending with their value. Records of value are transferred to the public archives section when they assume non-current status. Records of ephemeral value are destroyed to make room for new records accessions. This study revealed that electronic records were treated differently from paper records in a number of respects as outlined below.

Researchers discovered that although all the 16 government ministries in the study had transferred paper records before, but none of them had ever transferred electronic records to a records centre. One administration officer in one of the ministries found transfer of electronic records as absurd as he asked “How is this possible? Remember electronic records are intangible”. It was discovered that the only form of transfer that had been undertaken was rather indirect where paper print-outs of electronic records were made and the paper print-outs were in turn transferred to Gweru Records Centre. Gweru Records Centre is the sole government records centre in the Midlands Province where all public departments in the province transfer their semi-current records to.

Researchers probed 16 Records and Information Management officers of the 16 ministries why they had never transferred any electronic records to a records centre. Their responses are succinctly shown in the figure below.

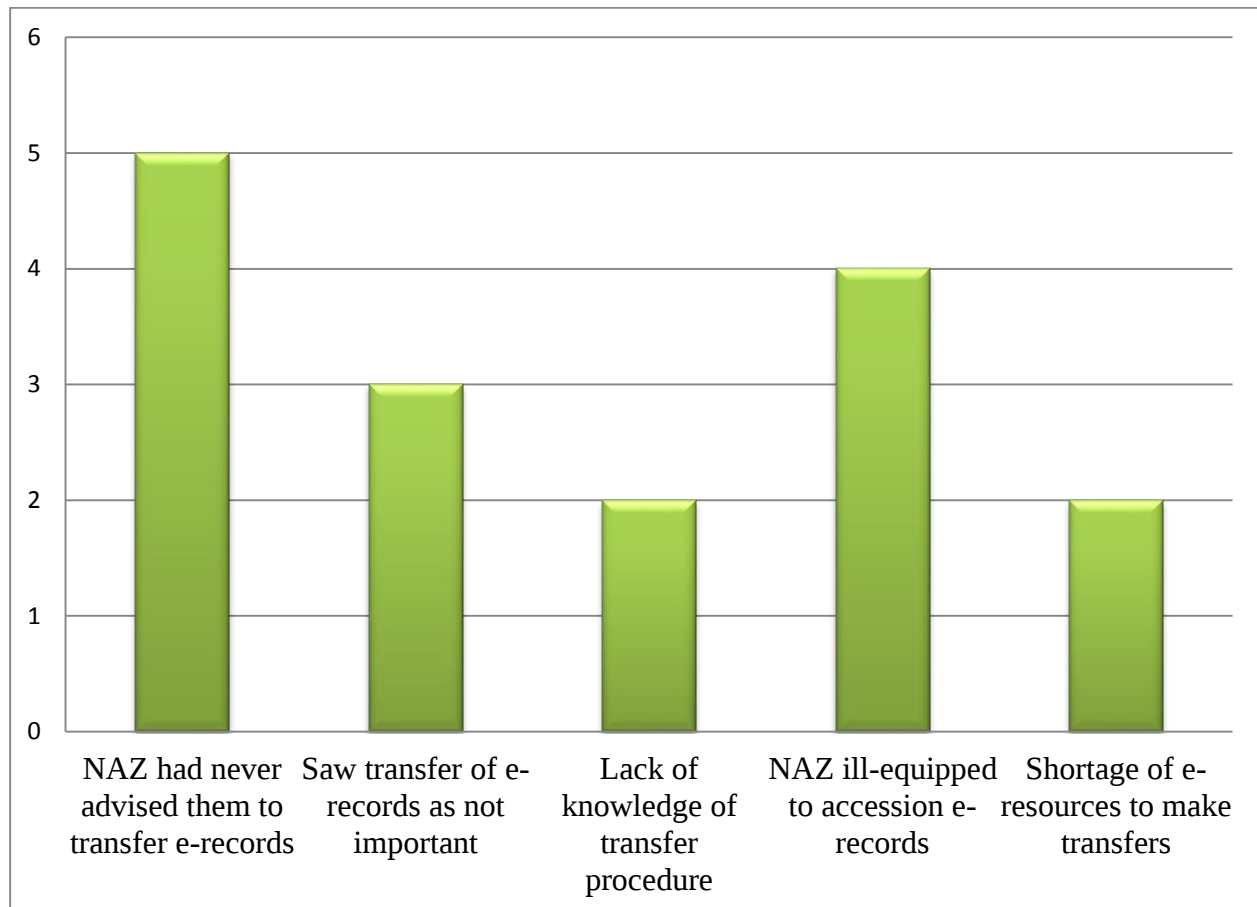


Fig. 1: Reasons why ministries had never transferred electronic records to a records centre

Informants gave different reasons to explain why they had never transferred electronic records to Gweru Records Centre. The commonest reason cited by five (31%) informants was that NAZ through its provincial arm, Gweru Records Centre, had never advised them to transfer electronic records before as they always did in the case of paper records. Gweru Records Centre accessioned paper records from public departments in the Midlands Province. As noted by Bhebhe, Masuku and Ngulube (2013:52) Gweru Records Centre like all other provincial records centres in Zimbabwe, lacks state of the art infrastructure that could be used to house, store or

preserve electronic records transferred into their custody. Thus, it is not surprising that staff of Gweru Records Centre never advised public departments to transfer electronic records to them.

The second commonest reason cited by four (25%) informants was that Gweru Records Centre was incapacitated to handle electronic records transfers as it used an adapted building as a records centre. The repositories and offices had no special storage facilities and equipment to house and handle electronic records. Nkala, Ngulube and Mangena (2012:94) hold that although archival institutions should accession electronic records produced by government departments, the National Archives of Zimbabwe was incapacitated to do this. This challenge was also noted by Matangira (2016:224) in her study of post-colonial records management in Zimbabwe. Thus, poor infrastructure and equipment played a big role in preventing public departments from transferring semi-current electronic records. It also prevented Gweru Records Centre from nagging public departments from making such transfers. Similar infrastructural challenges were noted in other countries like South Africa by Ngoepe and Keakopa (2011:158) and Tanzania and Namibia (Matangira 2016:224) where archival institutions lacked the necessary infrastructure to ingest electronic records into archival custody.

The third commonest reason cited for lack of transfer of electronic records to records centres was failure by officers in public departments to see the importance of electronic records as opposed to paper records. This was shown by three (19%) informants who claimed that electronic records were not as important as paper records which they regarded as “real records”. Mutsagondo (2017:110) notes that many officers within Zimbabwe’s public service resisted change, especially when they felt such change threatened their jobs or if they felt it exposed their ignorance. He also noted that many lower and higher level officers were used to traditional means of doing things and as such did much to destabilise the electronic records management programme. In his study of electronic records management in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe, Mutsagondo (2017:110) quoted one informant who remarked, “This electronic thing [electronic records management] will kick us out of our jobs. We need to tread careful”. Thus, attitude, ignorance and tradition contributed towards the drive to transfer electronic records to records centres.

The fourth reason cited was public departments' financial incapacity to procure necessary electronic gadgets like computers, cassette disks and flash disks. This was cited by two (12.5%) informants. It is true that Zimbabwe has been facing economic and financial challenges, especially during the first decade of the 21st century, a period Matangira (2016:48) coins "a decade of loss for information management". She argues that during this period, government support to the culture and heritage sectors drastically declined. Mnjama (2002:39) and Tafor (2001:41) also hold that many archives and records management programmes fail due to lack of funding. However, the failure to procure small and cheap gadgets by Zimbabwe's public service, for example, cassette and flash disks smack more of attitude than poverty. This can be seen in the sentiments of Matangira (2016:176) who holds that top management in Zimbabwe's public service was generally not very supportive and appreciative of records management functions and activities which they usually accorded a very low profile.

The last two (12.5%) informants cited lack of knowledge about how electronic records could be transferred as a reason for their failure to transfer electronic records to Gweru Records Centre. For them, the only transfer possible was that of paper records. Here lack of electronic records policy and lack of knowledge is to blame. Many organisations in developing countries do not have electronic records management policies. Ngulube (2001) cited by Sejane (2004:2) argues the major means of dealing with challenges to do with electronic records management is through formulation of policies and strategies to deal with electronic records. Sejane (2004:2) firmly holds that this pre-condition hitherto largely lacks in Sub-Sahara Africa. Lack of knowledge about records management in general and electronic records management in particular, also contributes to failure to transfer or see logic in transferring electronic records to records centres. Mutsagondo (2017:83) noted that only seven out of nine records and information management officers in the Midlands Province were professionally qualified in records management. In addition, these officers were on the lower echelons of the organizational strata and thus could hardly influence decisions within their ministries where top management were rather uninterested and apprehensive about records management.

4.1.2 Destruction of electronic records

Destruction of electronic records was very common as all 55 informants indicated that they had at one stage or another deleted electronic records either on the computer or on external storage devices. One officer did not find fault with such wanton destruction and asked, “What is wrong with deleting messages on my computer? Should I seek clearance in order to make my computer user-friendly?” The officer failed to realise that records on his computer were public property and as such was supposed to be held in trust of the public in the course of government service delivery.

Destruction of electronic records was not professionally handled. Only six (37.5%) ministries appraised electronic records to determine their disposal status. This meant that there was widespread and wanton destruction of electronic records of value in many government ministries in the Midlands Province. Although appraisal of e-records was done in the six ministries, it must be noted that various officers had a lot of control over the records in their custody and as a result, many electronic records were unprocedurally and pre-maturely destroyed.

Researchers asked informants what guided their action to destroy electronic records on the computer and on external storage devices. The following responses were obtained as shown in the table below.

What guided public officers in destroying electronic records (N = 55)

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
When memory is full	12	22
After appraisal	6	11
When project is complete	14	25
After printing to paper	20	36
No response	3	5

The majority of informants, that is, 20 (36%) stated that they destroyed electronic records after making paper print-outs. They saw paper records as more important and easier to manage. Mutsagondo (2017:110) note that some officers within Zimbabwe’s public service were so used

to the traditional way of doing things that anything to the contrary was suspicious and rather unwelcome. For many officers, paper is the default records format and for them asking paper print-outs was enough to preserve records for future use or reference. Reliance on paper print-outs was also noted Zimbabwe's public service by Mutsagondo and Tsvuura (2015) where public departments had a tendency to print electronic mail messages which they then transferred to records centres.

A total of 14 (25%) informants destroyed electronic records on the computer or on external storage devices once projects for which the electronic records were created were completed. Deletion of electronic records in the Midlands Province was not systematically done owing to lack of electronic records policy as well as due to lack of proper records management skills by some officers in public departments. Sejane (2004:101) who noted a similar uncalled for destruction of electronic records in Lesotho attribute the problem to lack of policy and guidelines on electronic records management as well as lack of comprehensive knowledge about the new records regime.

Twelve (22%) informants destroyed electronic records on the computer and external storage devices when such components' memory was full. They would delete some documents regardless of their importance in order to create space for new business. One Records and Information Management officer stated that they had problems with fellow officers from other disciplines who many times assumed "total" ownership of records in their custody and refused to listen to their wise counsel. Such officers could delete electronic records on their computers without referring to Records and Information Management officers' plea for appraisal or proper disposal. Citing Wato (2003), Sejane (2004:101) noted in the case of Lesotho that it was common practice for officers to delete vital electronic mail messages when their servers filled up and without having done any appraisal of the electronic records.

Only six (11%) informants claimed that their destruction of e-records was appraisal-based. According to ICA (2005:36), the purpose of archival appraisal is to decide which records should be preserved for the long-term and which ones should be destroyed. ICA (2005:36) holds that electronic records should be appraised in the same manner as paper records are appraised. The

fact that only 11% of informants claimed that they appraised electronic records before they destroyed them means that many electronic records of value were being unwarrantedly destroyed. In a related study on electronic mail management, Mutsagondo and Tsvuura (2015) noted that there was a 27% appraisal rate of electronic mail records in public departments in Zimbabwe. Nasieku (2012) who carried out a study on electronic records management at Moi University in Kenya discovered that no appraisal of electronic records was ever done before electronic records were disposed. The haphazard destruction of electronic records meant that Zimbabwe was failing to honour the ISO 15489 standard which advocated for the proper management of e-records, which included proper and authorised destruction.

4.2 Access to electronic records

The issue of access was addressed from two angles, that is, access to electronic records in the present era and access to the same in the future. According to Millar (2009:52) access is the right, opportunity, means of finding, using or retrieving information.

Currently, officers accessed electronic records that had something to do with them or their line of duty. This was expressed by 42 (76%) out of 55 officers. Accountants accessed accounting records, human resources officers accessed human resources records and administration officers accessed administration records. Officers who accessed electronic records across the board were firstly, the heads of ministries who supervised all other officers and so had access to their electronic records. Secondly, secretaries, who as one of their duties typed documents from different sections and departments of their ministries, also had access to electronic documents from a wide spectrum. Lastly, Records and Information Management officers, who managed records in all the 16 ministries also had access to electronic records from all departments and sections of their ministries. Controlled access in the current era is important as it makes information secure and in the process guaranteeing administrative serenity within the organisation.

In the context of this study, access to electronic records in the future was more important than access to the same in the present era. The following were noted as impediments to access to electronic information in the future:

- Increasing creation, receipt and use of electronic records within the public service, whilst there is no corresponding infrastructure, skills and policies to make the transition to digital management of such records possible.
- Inability by Gweru Records Centre and all other archival centres in Zimbabwe to ingest electronic records into archival custody.
- Lack of transfer of semi and non-current electronic records by all ministries in the Midlands Province.
- Uninformed, unwarranted and unsanctioned destruction of electronic records by action officers.

As noted by ICA (2004:59), the provision of access is the ultimate objective of record-keeping. Towing the same line are Mnjama and Wamukoya (2006:281) who hold that retention without accessibility is useless. Likewise, Sejane (2004:45) holds that records are valuable if they can be found when needed for action or for reference. Access to electronic records only in the present is rather less useful. Commenting on this scenario are Ngoepe and van der Walt (2009:1) who argue that provision of access to electronic records is a major challenge around the world. Keakopa (2008) also notes that despite there being freedom of information laws in many countries, there were no guarantees of access to electronic records in the future in many developing countries. The case of government ministries in Zimbabwe has helped to show how the future can be bleak for electronic records or electronic information. Weiss (1992)'s Intergenerational Equity Theory which advocates for fairness amongst the past, present and future generations in terms of how they access natural and cultural heritage comes into the spotlight as more access attention to electronic records seems directed towards the present generation and not towards the future generations.

Conclusion and recommendations

A lot of electronic records are being created, received and used in government ministries in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe. This is a welcome development which is in sync with recent trends in electronic government in the developing and developed world. However, it is rather worrisome as a lot of electronic information is getting lost through improper handling, unsanctioned destruction of electronic records and inability by records centres to ingest electronic records into archival custody for the sake of future generations. The current

infrastructure, equipment, skills and policies are themselves a threat to the future of electronic information. Thus, the constitutional right to access to information is whatever format is rather not guaranteed.

This study advances the following in order to put in place measures to safeguard access to electronic information both in the present and in the future.

- The government of Zimbabwe through the National Archives of Zimbabwe should put in place electronic records management policies that guide the public service in disposal of electronic records.
- The Digital Transition Framework that the National Archives of Zimbabwe has embarked on in 2017 should be supported to promote the creation, receipt, use, maintenance and disposal of electronic records within the public service.
- There is need to establish purpose-built records centres in all the provinces of the country which have equipment and infrastructure that can house and handle electronic records should there be transfers of electronic records.
- There is need to develop staff skills in the area of records management in general and electronic records in particular. This will greatly help in shaping attitudes as well as management of records in line with changing national and international trends.
- Zimbabwe should keep abreast with technological trends in the area of records management in line with international best practices, for example, as propounded by the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO 15489).

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