Is archival advocacy the missing piece in the management of records and archives in Zimbabwe? Records and Archives Professional’s perceptions

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Abstract: The public sector in Zimbabwe has experienced missing, incomplete and poorly managed records leading to government losing money, assets and equipment. Even during the pre-colonial era, in the then Southern Rhodesia, public records were inappropriately managed, and the records would accumulate to abnormal volumes in different offices (Chaterera 2016). In addition, Mnjana (1989) state that archivists only arrange and describe archives assuming users will come and access them. Fast forward to the present day, the trend continues. The Auditor General’s Reports (2015-2017) highlighted incomplete financial records, fuel records, and at times missing procurement records in public entities. Maphorisa and Jain (2013) state that archives are suffering from low uptake and utilisation by users making it difficult for Information professionals to justify their existence and receive funding. While records have been considered an organisational asset that ensures transparency and good government, these records management anomalies raise the question on what could be the reason behind this poor string of records management malpractice. This qualitative study sought opinions of Information professionals to establish whether records and archival advocacy was the missing piece of the puzzle in the management of records and archives. Convenient sampling technique was used to obtain views on archival advocacy with open ended questionnaire method used to solicit data. Data generated was analysed thematically and presented in narrative format. Findings from the study showed that due to poor records and archival advocacy initiatives the profession was negatively perceived, vacancies were occupied by unqualified staff while resources allocated were not enough. It was recommended that records and archives professionals should coordinate records and archival advocacy efforts and be active in changing the negative perceptions of resource allocators, public figure and the general public about their profession.

Key words: Public sector, records and archival advocacy, records management, Information Professionals, Archival activism

I. INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe has been haunted by poor records management system which have seen the record mismanaged from the time it is created write through to the last phase of its life cycle, the archival phase where it is not being fully utilised by the public. This has negatively impacted the role of memory institutions as they are failing to live up to their mandate while at the same time depriving citizens, who are the sponsors of the documentary cause, aspects of accountability, good governance and transparency. The 21st century has seen governments operating under tight budgets and for organisations to succeed, there is need for them to be visible and justify their existence. Maphorisa and Jain (2013) state that the existence of archives can only be justified through the level of usage of their collections. This can be done through advocating for records and archives, to the public that consumes records and archives products, resource allocators who bankroll records and archives activities and the public figures, who are policy makers and can influence other players to donate and fund towards the documentary evidence cause. Unfortunately, Information practitioners have been accused of packaging records and archives services and expecting information seekers to come and access them (Mnjana 1989) while at the same time being described as introverted, ordinary, impartial, passive, quiet, territorial and having limited influence (Tania, Burr and Park 2008). The effects of such have led to stereotypes Zimbabwean Information professionals are facing. Hence this study sought perceptions of Information professionals on whether records and archives advocacy was the missing link in the management of records and archives in Zimbabwe.

Statement of the problem

Records and archives management has been characterised by several anomalies such as bad perceptions, neglect, inadequate skills, lack of resources, low uptake of archival materials, and support amongst other factors. This has been reflected in the Auditor-General Report (2016, 2017) which highlighted missing records, incomplete records, and sometimes no records to account for actions by public servants. Zimbabwe, being one of the countries with a records management structure for public records, tertiary institutions that train records and archives students and skilled personnel to manage records, one is bound to ask whether records and archival advocacy is the missing piece of the puzzle in the management of records in Zimbabwe.

Objectives of the study

This study was guided by the following objectives;

- to establish records and advocacy initiatives that records and archives professionals have participated in
• to gather views on how the poor records and archives have impacted the management of records and archives in Zimbabwe
• to explore challenges affecting effective records and archival advocacy

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

What is records and archival advocacy

Finch (1995) defines it to include fundraising activities, through private sources, marketing archival services through exhibits, public outreach programs, and community service, making collaborations with other institutions and working with the media namely the radio, television, and print media to spread both good and bad news. Similarly, Cox (2009) referred Archival advocacy as a way that seeks to persuade individuals and organisations to act on behalf of a program or institution through activities and actions consciously aimed at achieving a goal. Pierce-Moses (2005), on the other hand defined it as a core archival function linked with defending, interceding, pleading, and raising one's voice on behalf of a proposal relating to archives. He further states that archival advocacy is about expressing the value of archives to citizens, organisations, and those involved in decision making and building key relationships with a wide range of stakeholders. Chartier and Quigley (2013) summed up archival advocacy as a planned effort, directed by a capable organisation or leader to voice an archival concern using both traditional and on-line methods. As shown, it is a planned program that involves being a voice for the records and archives profession by building relationships between the public, resource allocators and public figures that can make things happen in the profession.

Records and archives advocacy activities

There are different types of activities that can be engaged on if one wants to remain relevant, ensure that resources are channelled even towards the records and archives profession and to deal with different stereotypes attached to the profession. The activities range from public presentations, workshops, publication and distribution of brochures, flyers, press releases, newsletters, mass media advertisements and features, public displays and exhibitions, archives open days and archives week, curricular exercises, news releases, using the telephone to market the (telemarketing) and using the Internet (Mnjama 2009). Another way of advocating for archives was creating / building relationships with the board of directors, inviting them for something like a luncheon, listening to what they have to say, and at the same time meet their information needs. That will make archives inseparable from organizational activities, create a reliance from them, and as such make organizational members revere archival collections. Apart from building relationships is the fact of publicizing archival materials through exhibits, decorating offices, providing materials to the public, and disseminating reproduced audios directly to the public (Haws 2013).

Gaub (2011) outlines tactics and practices to utilize print, radio, and television outlets to promote archives and their activities saying these can help build connections, maintain credibility, and understand their processes and deadlines. Theimimer (2011) prod archivists to consider using Web 2.0 and other technology tools help support a key goal of archival advocacy. This has a potential to reach new audiences, create communities, and as such expand social connections. Utilising these tools reaches new users and improves interacting with archival resources, which contributes to the democratisation of information access and knowledge. When archives provide users access to online content, whether viewing or interacting, it empowers them while creating an understanding of the importance of archives to society.

Records and archival advocacy must be directed towards different stakeholders. These according to Hackman (2012) include:

a) Decision-makers who are above employees by a level or two and those with formal authority over an organisation's operations and resources.

b) Other internal actors are the key players whom any archival advocacy work must target because these people are involved in crafting policies and decisions. These could include human resources department, finance, legal, communication, IT, development office, public relations, government affairs and other selected significant individuals and outside parent organisations with high potential influence.

c) Well-known public figures in a community which include philanthropist, media personality, prominent individuals or organisations with an interest in archives, major beneficiaries of outputs from searches in archives, former board members, private donors, clientele or partners of the parent organisation. These are instrumental in any organisation if they share the same vision and desire to manage archives and as such organisations should identify, earmark, and target such if archival advocacy is to succeed.

Haws (2013) further articulates the variety of areas to apply advocacy efforts: budget, enriching daily operations, fundraising potential, and organizational loyalty. Activities described include tours for board members and major donors; publicity; exhibits; and, most importantly, developing and maintaining relationships. While many archivists think of advocacy as talking to people. Moroaso, the author communicates the importance of listening. By understanding users' and stakeholders' perspectives, she provided resources and often predicted their needs, which made her indispensable to the organization. These relationships, particularly with board members, continue beyond their terms on the board. She also notes that advocacy must be an ongoing effort to reach new board members, connect with musicians and their families, and other activities. By paying attention and
continually assessing stakeholders’ interests and ideas, she built solid and long-lasting relationships.

**Purpose of Records and Archival advocacy**

Considering the unpleasant image in the resource allocators, public and, decision-makers regarding the archival profession, archival advocacy can come in handy in changing these perceptions. Archival advocacy has been described by the Society of America Archivists (2015) as the voice for the archival profession that ensures that awareness and support of archival services is obtained including alliances with local, national, regional, and international records and archives organisations are forged.

Additionally, archival advocacy plays a critical role in ensuring that archives are protected, and their access ensured (International Council on Archives 2015). The Society of American Archivist (2015) also sees advocacy as an important tool aimed at improving wages, working conditions of archivists, and representing the cause of the archivist world over. As such it is through archival advocacy that people can be drawn closer to the archival materials, which will improve the accessibility of archival materials, make people understand their work and appreciate them, and most importantly open doors for more support and recognition.

Moreover, an outreach programme to the society may also result in the archivist’s role being appreciated. The more the society is aware of the value of its archival holdings, the greater the support the archival institutions will expect to receive. Lekaukau (1993:32) put it: Publicity programmes can help create awareness. Popularising the services can lead to a situation where fiscal authorities can be convinced to allocate more resources to the Archives to undertake programmes that can directly benefit the common man. Williams (2006) further identifies the following to be the benefits of successful advocacy from the broadest level:

1. **Survival:** in order to avoid being the target of budget cuts or rationalization programmes you need to demonstrate that you are doing something useful in an proactive way;
2. **Generation of funding:** available via demonstration of programmes showing compliance with government and other access agenda;
3. **Increase funding leads to development of services and broadening of your user**
4. **Increased use leads to generation of wider support and appreciation of archives and contributes benefits to the wider society**;
5. **And – it is to be hoped – the fuller realisation that archives belong at the very heart of people’s lives.**

**Challenges affecting archival advocacy**

There are a plethora of challenges affecting archival advocacy. These include:

a. **The nature of archivists’/records managers**

Records and archivists have been considered reserved, quiet and lazy people who are only passive and are not willing to take charge and be heard. This becomes a challenge in organisations and society at large as priority is given to those that justify their existence and contribution to the well-being of an organisation. Tania, Burr and Park (2008) state that archivists are not known for being outspoken but rather reserved people who are just territorial and reactive.

b. **Shortage of resources**

Records managers and archivists lack ammunition to carry out archival advocacy at a large scale. These according to Maphorisa and Jain (2013) include shortage of resources, lack of training, inadequate Human resources, lack of advocacy policy and inadequate funding. Apart from that, human resources are an issue as well. Most staff members are not qualified and their remuneration is way below. This has affected the quality of work

**III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to establish the views of information professionals on whether archival advocacy was the missing piece in the management of records in Zimbabwe or not. And purposive sampling was used to establish perceptions on whether archival advocacy is the missing piece of the puzzle in the management of records and archives in Zimbabwe. The study focused on Information professions’ views in the Matabeleland region of Zimbabwe and focus was given to registry staff and archival personnel. The open ended questionnaire method was used to generate data from the respondents and was distributed electronically.

**IV. FINDINGS**

The following findings were observed:

**Records and archives advocacy initiatives**

It was established that records and archival advocacy activities included exhibition during the International Trade Fair [mostly by the National Archives of Zimbabwe], school visits which however had stopped due to shortage of resources, tour to the archival institutions by students, independence day celebrations archives and through the use of the web (internet) these were used to publicise records and archives management activities. Conferences and workshops were also used to advocate for records and archives in Zimbabwe organised by the National Archives of Zimbabwe.

**Impact of records and archives advocacy programmes**

The Informational professionals expressed concerns regarding the impact of these records and archival advocacy initiatives. University graduates stated that the initiatives were not helping improve the attitudes of records and archives profession per ser. Asked to elaborate, one respondent stated that after graduating 5 years ago, him and colleagues remained unemployed yet records and archives jobs were occupied by the unqualified people. He further stated that...
human resources practitioners and decision makers are not obliged to employ skilled records management because they were not making ‘enough noise’.

Another employee at a government department working in a public hospital commented that indeed archival advocacy greatly contributed to records and archives misnomers’. Ignorance by some superiors of the importance of documentary evidence means that we are not given enough stationery, budget and even personnel. She stated that they are short staffed and their opinions were not being heard as people know less about the opinion. The respondent went further to state that during times of economic hardships like these, department is the least considered.

Respondents views showed that due to poor records and archival advocacy initiatives, the effects are as summed as follows;

- There is shortage of resources such as stationery, filing cabinets and storage space which resulting in unethical records management practices being carried out such as piling records, unplanned destruction of records
- Unqualified records personnel have resulted to loss of records, unemployment of qualified records people, misfiling
- Poor remuneration has led to high staff turnover, loss of morale for qualified staff and changing of carrier paths
- The professional growth of Information science is being affected as people are considering other courses that are better paying at the same time regarded better by communities.

**Challenges being faced by in carrying out records and archives advocacy programs**

Challenges outlined here included the fact that there was not coordinated effort in planning comprehensive records and archives advocacy programmes. Inadequate funding, lack of advocacy policies in organisations, lack of comprehensive advocacy training were also highlighted amongst the challenges affecting records and archives advocacy. One respondent strongly cited that the absence of a vibrant records and archives association was the greatest impediment for the profession. The profession could not effectively coordinate records and archives advocacy activities and as such, the impact was minimal.

**V. DISCUSSION**

**Records and archives advocacy initiatives**

The study established that there were records and archives advocacy initiatives though not rigorous, planned and adequate. This was in line with sentiments echoed by Ngulube (1999:21) who argued that “Marketing in the true sense of the world is not applied in the archival institutions in East and Southern Africa. Much of what passed for marketing was a variety of promotional activities which was a variety of promotional activities which in essence are just component of marketing. The study also established that exhibitions were conducted by the National archives of Zimbabwe to market records and archives services. Archives contain original documents which are unique and irreplaceable. From this fact, archival materials must be exhibited in accordance with their preservation needs (Williams 2006). Exhibitions can be carried within the galleries of archival institutions themselves or they can be organized to coincide with major events in the country. According to Mnjama (2009), the official opening of the exhibition may also be arranged to coincide with a special talk by a prominent scholar or researcher on a topic that draws heavily on archival sources.

Workshops and seminars were also highlighted as advocacy initiatives that were carried out by Information professionals though not frequently. As Pederson (1993:333) puts it, “archives can benefit from sponsoring workshops and seminars that provide a more thorough coverage of archival subjects.” Such events, with various topics provide an ideal forum for the archivist to advocate the use of archives under his custody. The National Archives itself may organise its own series of workshops and seminars to be held annually where invitations will be sent out to specific target groups.

The study findings also indicated that guided tours were organised for school children and first year university students. The immediate benefits of guided tours especially to school children may not be realized immediately, but it is an effort worth investing in as these children are the future researchers in the society (Kamatula 2011)

**Impact of archival and advocacy initiatives on records management**

The study showed that the records and archives advocacy initiatives were not reaching the intended audience and not producing the desired results hence the negative perceptions that were prevailing in the records and archives management circles and poor records management practices

**Challenges hindering the success of records and archival advocacy**

Lack of coordinated effort was highlighted as the major hindrance to effective records and archives advocacy. Information professionals pointed to this as a major barrier to effective advocacy and as contributing to poor records and archives management practices

**VI. RECOMMENDATION**

It is recommended that;

- An association is formulated that will work with National Archives of Zimbabwe to coordinate records and archival advocacy programmes. Subscriptions will help bankroll records and archives advocacy programmes hence ensure that the public is aware of the records and archives profession and stands firm
against malpractices being witnessed across the country

- Change of attitude and negative personal traits by information professionals will help the cause of advocacy move to greater heights. They should be outspoken, loud and pro-active to ensure that they take matters that affect their profession seriously

- The Information professionals should also engage ICTs and advocate for records and archives program through the use of internet related activities such as blogging, the use of asocial media such as twitter and WhatsApp to create harsh tags that will create awareness to the people. The Archives 2.0 principle can be pivotal if fully implemented to create awareness. Abraham (1997) in Mnjama (2009:23) rightly summarises that: Establishing an archival presence on the World Wide Web is an effective and economical form of outreach. Unlike printed materials there are no production costs and no left over inventory. Unlike lectures there is no scheduling, no prima donna speaker, no invitations, and no caterers. And unlike exhibits, there is no physical presence to monitor and protect. In addition, a web site is available, to those with the equipment, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, at no additional cost. Plus, it is infinitely and immediately updatable, upgradable, and enhanceable.

- There is need for creating an archival advocacy policy and engage a lobbyist to be the image and face of the profession. He/she will provide advice on matters relating image building and maintenance

VII. CONCLUSION

There is need for the records and archives profession in Zimbabwe to engage in extensive advocacy and activism if they are to be taken seriously. This in turn will help ensure that they are noticed and supported by policy makers, resource allocators and the general public hence improve their visibility and image

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