

# Paper-Based Records an Obstacle to Service Delivery during Covid-19 Lockdown: A Case of the National Archives of Zimbabwe, Chinhoyi Records Centre

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**Abstract:** This study examined the repercussion and lessons learnt on failure to automate records at the National Archives of Zimbabwe, Chinhoyi Records centre. The study used a mixed methodology with the intention of triangulating the results. Data were collected from the National Archives of Zimbabwe, Chinhoyi Records centre staff, government departments and other users through interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis. The study sample included six (6) employees from the National Archives of Zimbabwe and four (4) Record Management Supervisors from the government departments who were operating during the lockdown. The purposive sampling technique was employed. The study findings revealed access to records and archives was affected especially at the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) where the use of electronic technologies is still at its infant stage and automation of records and archives is moving at a snail pace. According to the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) under national objectives government units must adopt and implement procedures to develop efficiency and competence. However, this was not the case with the NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre during Covid-19 lockdown from 29 March 2019 to July 2021. The study findings revealed that Government departments, local authorities and parastatals that were operating during the Covid 19 lockdown failed to access their records on time as the archival institution was temporarily closed in a bid to control the spreading of coronavirus. The study recommends that NAZ need to adopt an Electronic Records Management Systems (ERMS). In addition, the NAZ must also develop a cloud storage for its records as well as making sure that records and archives can be accessed virtually by government departments and other users who deposits their materials at the Centre.

**Key words:** Automation, Covid 19, Lockdown, Electronic Records Management Systems Records Centre, Good Governance, Service Delivery.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Paper based records caused a halt to record and archives access during the Covid-19 pandemic era across the globe, this did not spare NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre. Zimbabwe has been affected by the coronavirus wave like any other country in the world. This has resulted in many private and public institutions shutting down, for example the NAZ

Chinhoyi Records Centre temporarily closed from March 2019 to July 2021 since it was not considered an essential service sector during that period. The services offered by NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre were affected by lack of automated records and archives during Covid-19 restrictions. The government of Zimbabwe enacted the Public Health (Covid -19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) (National Lockdown) (No.2) Order, 20 to minimise the effects of the Covid 19 pandemic through limiting public gatherings and imposing curfews (Veritas, 2021). The business working hours for both private and public institutions were reduced. However, records are an essential element for any development within a nation. Therefore, access to records and archives must be availed to users at a given time for them to make informed decisions at any time. Thus, this study investigated how the unautomated records and archives at the NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre were an obstacle to service delivery during the Covid-19 lockdown. The use of digital technologies at NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre has not yet greatly developed. Which means there is need to map a way forward for electronic government development at NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre.

### *Statement of the Problem*

Paper-based records an obstacle to records and archives access during Covid-19 era. A case study of NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre during Covid-19 lockdown from 29 March 2019 to July 2021. Government departments and other users of Chinhoyi Records Centre were struggling to get access to their records.

This study was guided by the following objectives which are to:

- i. Establish how paper-based records affected service delivery at Chinhoyi Records Centre during shutdown.
- ii. Find out the challenges encountered in accessing unautomated records and archives at Chinhoyi Records Centre during shutdown.

iii. Suggest ways of improving service delivery.

## II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a mixed methods approach. The reason for using a mixed approach in this study is that it ensures triangulation of both quantitative and qualitative data sources in a single study, and also result in the convergence and corroboration of results from the different methods on the same phenomenon (Maree, 2007). The purposive sampling technique was used to select six (6) officers of the NAZ, Records Centre: Chief Archivist (1) who was responsible for records management, Deputy Director (1) in charge of Records centres, Provincial Archivist (1), Records Management Officer (1), Executive Assistant (1) and Office Orderly (1). In addition, four (46) Records and information management supervisors from the departments with the most number of accessions were also selected. NAZ officers and records and information management supervisors from the departments were selected because they were the ones working during the period under study. A total number of 52 respondents were chosen. Data were collected from six (6) National Archives of Zimbabwe officers using interview scheduled online through Zoom platform. From the scheduled online zoom interview only four (4) respondents managed to attend, while two (2) of the participants couldn't attend they cited challenges of internet access. Questionnaires were distributed using emails to the forty-six (46) Records and information management supervisors of the various government departments. From the forty-six (46) distributed questionnaires only thirty-four 34 were returned and twelve (12) were not responded to. The percentage response rate was 88% out of the total study population. The study also scrutinised documents such as annual and quarterly reports, as well as visitors' registers from 29 March 2019 to 31 July 2021. Below is **Table 1** which shows the study population.

Table 1: Total population of the study

| Category                                       | Total |
|--|-------|
| Chief Archivist                                | 1     |
| Deputy Director                                | 1     |
| Provincial Archivist                           | 1     |
| Records Management Officer                     | 1     |
| Executive Assistant                            | 1     |
| Office Orderly                                 | 1     |
| Records and information management supervisors | 46    |
| Grand Total                                    | 52    |

### *Validity and Reliability of research instruments*

Reliability refers to the consistency of an instrument (Bryman, 2001). To ensure the dependability (reliability) of the instrument in collecting data, a semi-structured interview guide was used on all the respondents in the study population. The results emanating from the online interviews showed that

there was consistency in the answers provided by the participants at different time intervals, therefore making the interviews reliable. Validity in research instruments according to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) is measured in terms of truthfulness of findings, comparability of results and to some extent, translatability. Truth value or credibility refers to the accurate representation of information from the researchers' perspective and substantiating evidence. To ensure that the designed contents within the interview guide and questionnaire were viewed as credible to the study. The researchers made sure that the research instruments were sufficient in scope and coverage. The researchers also made sure that content validity was achieved by ensuring that questions formulated addressed set objectives. To achieve reliability of the online interview research, instrument a pilot test was done at NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre. Credibility was further ensured by consistency in conducting all online Zoom interviews. Then on questionnaires credibility was ensured through uniformity administering using emails. Electronic questionnaires were used as they were considered safe during this COVID 19 pandemic. Hard copies of questionnaires were avoided as a measure to curb the spread of the virus. These electronic questionnaires were distributed through the emails of respondents. In an effort to ensure that the study remained valid and not biased two data collection instruments (questionnaires and interviews) were used to for triangulation.

## III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The National Archives of Zimbabwe, Chinhoyi Records centre provides records and information management services to central government ministries, departments, local authorities, and parastatals. Chinhoyi Records centre also monitors and advise public institutions on the professional creation of records, filing systems, maintenance, utilisation, storage, and disposal of records (National Archives of Zimbabwe, 2018). The Records centre is also used as a for intermediate organised economical, high-density storage of semi current records which are deposited by public institutions through systematic records receiving and accessioning procedures. The types of records kept at Chinhoyi Records centre includes criminal records, personal files, pension files, health records, land records, government policies, minutes of meetings from government departments. The NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre is a custodian of paper-based records and archives. The paper-based record has proved to be inaccessible during Covid-19 shutdown. However, if these paper records were automated, they could be easily accessed virtually thereby providing good services delivery to its users during such periods as the Covid-19 shutdown. According to Olugu (2016) automation is a tool that can be used to facilitate records management and archival functions through the use of machines or systems to perform tasks normally performed or controlled by people. McDonald, (2006) supports that automated records and archives saves time, because technology allows retrieval of data in seconds

or minutes instead of hours, days or weeks. On which this can be access virtually as compared to paper-based records. Automation of records and archives allows Records Centre’s authorised users and staff to access and download their files instantly from desktop, laptops, or smartphones through internet without worrying about being at the Centre physically. Unlike the paper-based system where files are retrieved and accessed physically. There is also multiple access to records after automation. Kentish et’al (2001) concur that a shared folder on an organization’s intranet or internet replaces the correspondence file, and relational database systems replace paper forms and case files. Thus, automation of records and archives dovetail with the policy of e-governance which was launched in 2005 by the Zimbabwe government. The failure of government departments to access their records and archives were due to unavailability of automated records to facilitate Electronic Records Management Systems.

IV.DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The study established that National Archives of Zimbabwe, Chinhoyi Records Centre offered the following services to its stakeholders or government departments that is accessioning of records, records-keeping, processing file requests, authorising users to access their files being kept at the centre, receiving returning files and re-boxing received records. All these services were supposed to be rendered to stakeholders fairly without discrimination. However, this study was limited to issues to do with records request, file access and file returns during the Covid-19 induced lockdown from 29 March 2019 to 31 July 2021. Below is a Figure which shows all services rendered at the NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre?



Figure 1: Services rendered at the National Archives of Zimbabwe, Chinhoyi Records

The first research objective sought to establish how Covid-19 and the use of paper-based records management system affected NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre service delivery to its stakeholders during shutdown. According to the study findings National Archives of Zimbabwe’s annual report revealed that file requests, file access and file returns of records and archives from previous year 2018 was high as compared to 29 March 2019 up to 31 July 2021. The study established that in the year 2018 (50%) of NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre stakeholders requested files, accessed the files, and returned the files. In the same year Records and information management supervisors would physically visit the Records Centre without any imposed restrictions whatsoever and the Centre was operating at full capacity under normal business hours that is from 08:00 hours to 16:45 hours.

The study noted that in the year 2019 from January to 28 March services were being rendered to (40%) of NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre stakeholders. In this year there was a slight decrease in file requests, access to files as well as file returns. Then from 29 March 2019 to 31 July 2021 there was a huge decrease in terms of file accessing, requests and returns it dropped down to 10%. This figure of 10% according to the study was aggravated by the Covid-19 outbreak and government of Zimbabwe’s lockdown measures to stop the spread of the deadliest disease. This resulted in the temporary closure of the NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre causing a disruption in service delivery. This was also worsened by the fact that the NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre is a custodian of paper-based records and archives, access to this type of files requires physical presents and written down nor telephone call for file requests and returns. Below is a Figure which shows service delivery statistics from 2018 to 2021.

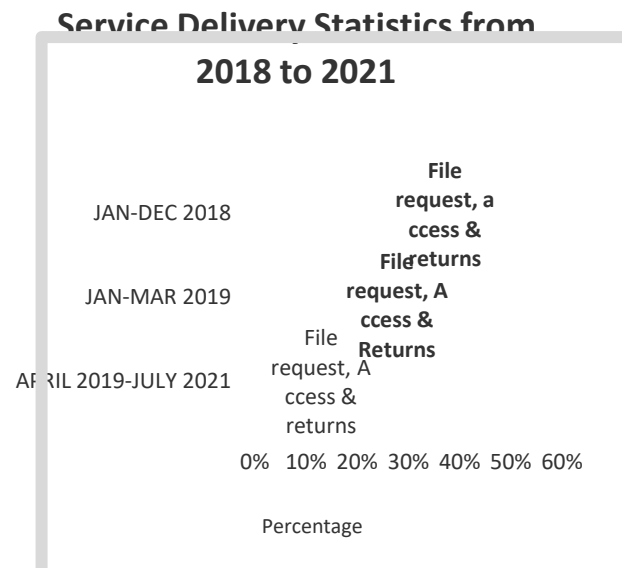


Figure 2: Service Delivery Statistics from 2018 to 2021

In addition, the study discovered that the Chinhoyi Records Centre was relying heavily on paper-based records than electronic records. Hence this had a negative effect towards the government of Zimbabwe’s idea of e-governance. The study revealed that during the shutdown period 29 March to 31 July 2021 Chinhoyi Records Centre was not offering any of its services to its valued users because it was temporarily closed. This resulted in the piling up of requested records as well as creating a backlog of services to be rendered to its various stakeholders. Furthermore, the study also found out that accessioning of records, storage of records and re-boxing processes were put to a halt. This crippled the Records Centre service delivery to its users.

The second objective intended to find out the challenges encountered at Chinhoyi Records Centre during shutdown period. The study found out that 60 % of the Records and information management supervisors out of the 46 government departments serviced by the NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre encountered difficulties in file accessing. Then 38% out of the 46 users of Chinhoyi Records Centre revealed that they were not able to request for any of their files due to the closure of the Centre. They had to wait for its opening, of which it was not clear when Centre will be opened due to Covid-19 escalating cases which were being recorded in Zimbabwe during the time of study. In addition, only 2% of the stakeholders cited that they were not able to return the files they had requested and were given at Chinhoyi Records Centre before the shutdown. This posed a threat to the life of these records since these departments did not have enough space and skill to manage these records their own premises. Below is Figure 3 showing the challenges faced by NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre users.

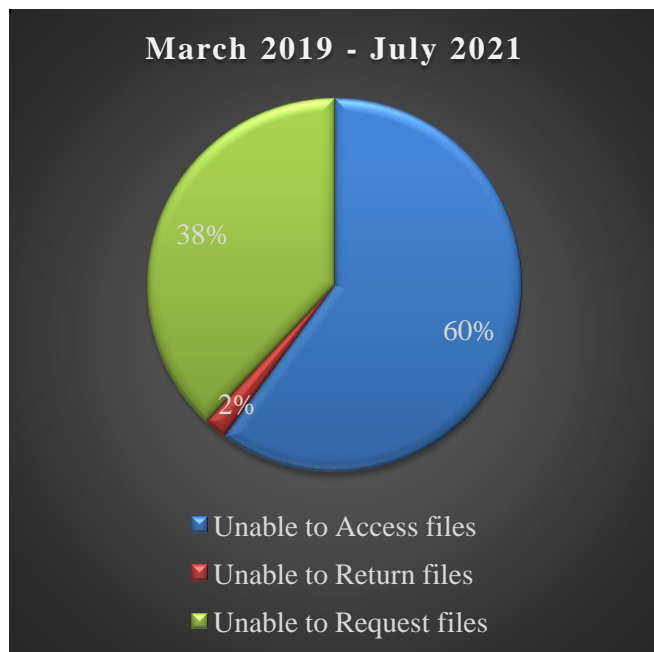


Figure 3: Challenges faced by Chinhoyi Records Centre User from 2019 to 2021

In line with the above second research objective this study also established that all (100%) the respondents indicated that normal services were disrupted during the Covid-19 induced lockdown. The fact which contributed to this anomaly was that records were in paper form, hence they required physical access. Due to government restrictions on movement as well as the shutdown of the NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre it was impossible for government departments to access their paper-based records, since there was no one to serve them.

Table 2: Departments that failed to access their records due to Covid 19 lockdown.

| Department  | Types of file requested                      | Quantity of files |
|---|--|-------------------|
| Judicial service commission (Criminal and civil courts) | Criminal records                             | 50                |
|   | Maintenance files                            | 45                |
|   | Deceased Estates                             | 39                |
| National Social Security Authority (NSSA)               | Pension files                                | 60                |
| Ministry of health and childcare                        | Personal files                               | 5                 |
| Ministry of Transport (VID)                             | Certificate of Competence (drivers licenses) | 5                 |

Source: NAZ, Chinhoyi monthly report

The study established that most of the departments who were operating during Covid 19 were failing to access records as the Chinhoyi Records Centre was on shutdown. This contributed to postponement of criminal and maintenance cases as a result services delivery to the citizens was affected. In addition to pensioners who passed away during the lockdown period had their benefits delayed being processed as their records were locked up at the Records Centre? Most of the departments who wanted to access their records were told to wait until the lockdown was over for example Vehicle Inspection Department requested duplicate records for its clients who had lost their original disc licenses. As a result, good governance was disturbed because of the format on which records at the records centre are stored.

The last research objective of this study inquired about the possible solutions to improving service delivery at NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre. Below is Table 4, showing suggestions on the ways of improving service delivery during Covid-19 outbreak and after. The suggestions emanated from interviewee and questionnaires from respondents.

*Suggested ways to improve service delivery during Covid-19 and after*

According to the study findings, when asked whether it was necessary to automate all paper-based records and archives at the National Archives of Zimbabwe, Chinhoyi Records Centre 95% of respondents agreed, that it was of benefit to do such a move. Also, when asked if it was necessary to change from paper-based records management to ERMS (70%) agreed. Then (65%) of the respondents highlighted that it would be better for them, if they could be rendered virtual services by

the NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre such as file request and access. 99% of the study participants indicated that ERMS requires one to have ICT skills thus NAZ Chinhoyi Records

Centre staff and users would need to be trained and vigorous financial support.

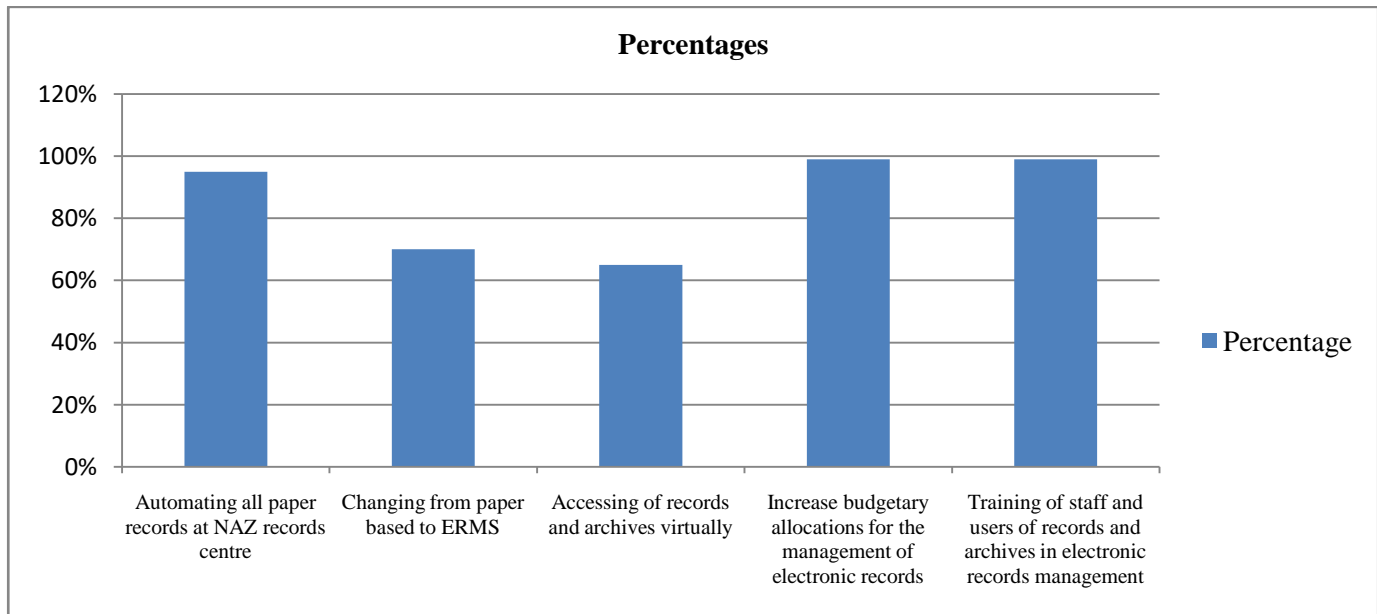


Table 4: Suggested ways to improve service delivery during Covid-19 and after

*User Perceptions on automating records and implementing an ERMS at NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre.*

According to the study findings (95%) of the participants mentioned that automating records and implementing an Electronic Records Management System would be of help at the NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre during Covid-19 era and for the future. The (95%) of participants alluded that through the use of automated records and ERMS they would be able to do the following activities: make file requests, access the files at the comfort of their workplaces, anywhere and anytime without visiting physically saving time and all. The study established that (95%) of the participants who said that records automation and ERMS would be very useful had the ability to access and use information technologies without any problems. The study revealed that (4%) percent of the participants were not really sure if automating records and the implementation of an ERMS was going to be of benefit to them during the lockdown. According to the findings the (4%) mentioned that their departments were not fully equipped with Information Communication Technologies. The study established that 1% of the participants students were of the view that ERMS would not be useful, since they lacked ICT skills and had security fears over their files. This was summarised in Figure 5 below

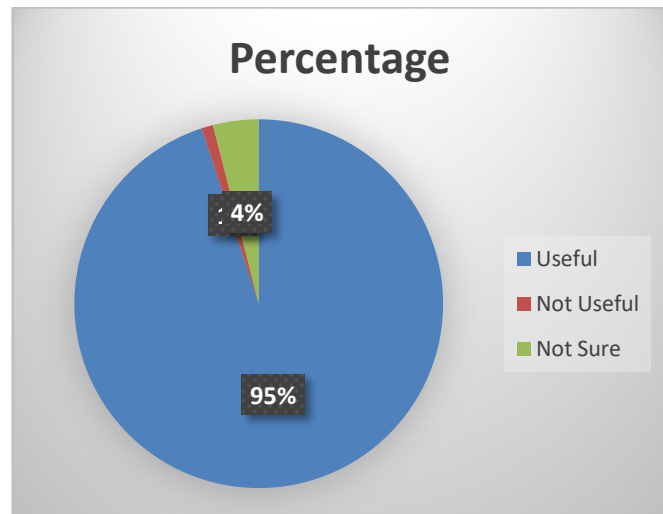


Figure 5: User Perceptions on automating records and implementing an ERMS at NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre.

**V. RECOMMENDATIONS EMANATING FROM THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

- The NAZ Chinhoyi Records Centre must automate all its records and store them in electronic databases.
- There is need for the National Archives of Zimbabwe Chinhoyi Records Centre to move away from paper-based records to Electronic Records Management Systems (ERMS)
- Access to records and archives must be virtual which dovetail with the demands of e-governance. As a result, this gives good service delivery.

- Chinhoyi Records Centre staff and users must be empowered with information technology skills through training.
- Chinhoyi Records Centre staff must be equipped with Information Technology gadgets which they can use to work whilst at home.

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