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E-Records Readiness in Malawi Local Government Councils: The Case Study of Karonga Town Council

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to assess e-records readiness in Malawi Local Government Councils with particular reference to Karonga Town Council (KTC) as a case study. Specifically, the study sought to identify the internal and public awareness of e-records and information programme, establish the e-records management products and technologies available at KTC, determine the level of compliance of KTC to policies, tools, standards, procedures and responsibilities for e-records management, and establish resources and training needs for e-records personnel. The study employed a descriptive survey design in which quantitative data collection technique was used. Questionnaires were used as data collection instruments. Altogether, 29 staffs were sampled randomly and purposively at KTC that comprised Principal Officers, Records clerk Staff, Records and ICT personnel and other Action officers. Overall, the study revealed that e-records readiness in Malawi Local Government Councils is low and evolving as evidenced by the presence of e-record products and technologies at KTC, where they were largely inadequate and obsolete. The study also established that there was inadequate and poor adherence to policies, standards and procedures for e-records management practices. Furthermore, responsibilities for e-records management were not clear and there was no established records management programme. The study also established five major challenges: Inadequate financial resources to purchase records equipment, inadequate ICT infrastructure, lack of training, lack of top management support, and inadequate or no qualified staffs in manning records. Therefore, among other things, the study recommends improvement of ICT infrastructure, development of e-records management policy, recruitment of more staff and conduct regular training in e-records products and other emerging technologies, and mobilization of more resources for management of records. The study was underpinned by International Records Management Trust (IRMT) e-records readiness assessment tool.

KEY WORDS: E-Readiness, E-Records Readiness, E-Records Assessment Tools, E-Records Management,

E-Government, Malawi, Local Government Councils, Karonga Town Council.

1. Introduction

In recent years, many governments both in developed and developing world have embraced electronic government (E-government) as one of the programmes to transform the public service. This is aimed at improving the service delivery. In essence, E-government is the on-line delivery of public or government services. According to International Records Management Trust [IRMT], 2009), e-government services produce electronic records (e-records) that document government transactions and online activities as reliable evidence. E-records provide essential evidence of organizational activities, transactions and decisions. They support business functions and are critical for the assessment of both government and private performance (Mnjama &Wamukoya, 2004). E-records also support effective transparency and accountability in decision making thereby contributing to national development (Kemon, 2007). Therefore, sound management of electronic records and print records has increasingly become a topical issue. The management of e-records has now gained important thrust in national development all over the world (Kalusopa, 2011).

Since majority of public organizations are conducting their business functions using ICT platforms, more and more records are generated electronically (Kalusopa, 2011). However, before e-government initiatives are implemented, there is need for thorough assessment of capacity in terms of legislative and policy framework, ICT infrastructure, human resources in order to determine if organizations are e-records ready. This is what is known “e-records readiness” (Moatlhodi, 2015). E-records readiness assessment helps government agencies to be aware of existing gaps, risks and opportunities in records management in use (Moalthod, 2015). E-records are also meant to guide development efforts by providing benchmarks for comparison and gauging the progress in organizations in understanding the e-records management. Therefore, the assessments are imperative for organizations to precisely establish and priorities e-records and information management needs based on the level of preparedness for e-records (Kalusopa, 2011).

2. Statement of the Problem

Kalusopa (2011) argues that increasing adoption of ICTs across the world has raised both opportunities and challenges. This demand for the assessment and breadth understanding of the applications of ICTs in records management. Therefore, this has

led to evolution of the concept of e-records readiness since it underscores the basis for the measurement of depth of infrastructure and capacity to manage e-records and information in organizations.

Similarly, literature indicates varying penetration rates of ICTs in Malawi. Owing to this development, the ubiquity of ICTs such as internet, computer and mobile phones access in the country for the last decade made it ideal for E-government implementation. Malawi Communication Regulatory Authority (MACRA,2015) reports that mobile penetration rate is estimated at 45%, computer access is 14%, while internet penetration rate is estimated at 6.5%. Although, ICT diffusion rates in Malawi are still lower than other African countries, the market is growing significantly. Consequently, Malawi adopted E-government programme where ICTs was prioritized as a key driver to modernize the public sector and improve service delivery (Makoza, 2015).

Various e-government initiatives have been implemented since 2012 and currently there are at different stages of development. Due to implementation of such e-government initiatives, means that a lot of e-records are created by government agencies and local government councils are not exceptions. Whilst studies on e-government readiness and mobile government readiness in Malawi exist, little is known about the e-records readiness assessment in the country (Mtingwi, 2012; Makoza, 2015).

The IRMT (2004) underscores the need for thorough e-records readiness assessment as a key to the implementation of e-records management and e-government in the public sector. Kalusopa (2011) also asserts that such e-records readiness assessment assists identifying areas that need to be improved for the success of e-records management that eventually contribute to the success of e-government projects in the country.

3. Objectives of the study

The main objective of the study was to assess e-records readiness in Malawi Local Government Councils with particular reference to Karonga Town Council (KTC). The specific objectives were to:

- Identify the internal and public awareness of e-records management programme
- Determine the level of compliance of KTC to procedures and tools for e-records management,
- Determine e-records management products and technologies available at KTC,

- Ascertain the presence of policies and responsibilities for e-records management,
- Establish resources and training needs for e-records management

4. Theoretical Framework & Literature Review

4.1. IRMT (2003) E-records Readiness Assessment Tool

This study was underpinned by IRMT (2004) e-records readiness assessment tool. The tool was developed to assist governmental organisations and other agencies to assess their e-records readiness against internationally accepted standards (Kalusopa, 2011). The e-records readiness tool was designed to be used in conjunction with existing e-government readiness tools to permit a high-level assessment of the infrastructure and capacity required to manage records and information. It also provides information to assist organisations to develop plans and strategies aimed at improving both paper-based and e-records environments. The areas addressed by the tool for measuring e-record readiness for government agencies or any other organisation include the followings:

- Records and information management policies and responsibilities;
- Records and information management products and technologies;
- Compliance with records and information management procedures, tools and standards;
- Human resources capacity and trainings;
- Internal and public awareness programme of records and information management;
- Guidelines for management of electronic records;

The IRMT e-records readiness assessment tool uses a brief questionnaire that provides a risk assessment of e-records readiness in government, national and enterprise levels.

4.2. Literature Review

Nengomasha (2009) conducted a study to establish e-records readiness in Namibia by applying IRMT e-records readiness tool. The findings revealed that records management policies and procedures in the public sector in Namibia were weak. The author recommended the need for an integrated records management programme for managing public services records to support transparency and accountability in Namibia.

Similarly, study by Keakopa (2006) on challenges and opportunities in the management of e-records in Botswana, South Africa and Namibia reported that several challenges impacted management of e-records including scarce human and financial resources, limited ICT infrastructure, no policies and procedures were in place to manage e-records in Namibia and Botswana compared to South Africa. The study recommended

the need for training and human capacity building for manning e-records. Previous study by Ngulube (2004) to determine how e-records were managed in Sub-Saharan Africa, revealed that countries like Kenya and South Africa were only countries that had policies, tools, guidelines, procedures and trained staff in place to manage e-records. The author also reported that of the 16 countries that were surveyed, only 6.3% had procedures in place for periodically migrating records. The author recommend that records managers and archivists should formulate policies that address the management of e-records including staff training.

Mutiti (2002) conducted a survey on the management of e-records in the East and Southern African (ESARBICA). The results revealed that slow progress in the management of e-records by public institutions in the region. This was exacerbated by lack of legal and administrative frameworks and lack of skills for records managers and archivist to implement e-records management. Study by IRMT (2004) conducted several studies on records management in developing countries specifically in Africa. The studies revealed the following challenges facing developing countries in the management of print and e-records: low awareness of the role of records management to support transparency and accountability in organizations; lack of plans for managing e-records; absence of tools, policies and standards for managing paper and e-records; lack of training and skills in records and archives management; lack of adequate facilities and infrastructure for storage and preservation of paper and e-records; absence of migration strategies for e-records; no disaster preparedness and recovery plans for paper and e-records.

While several studies exist on records management in Africa, very little of them exist on e-records readiness assessment. These studies reveal that very little progress has been achieved with regard to instituting necessary guidelines and strategies in the management of e-records (Kalusopa, 2011). When compared to western world, African countries have lagged behind in the use of ICTs and management of e-records (Keakopa, 2006; Moloi; 2006; Kemoni, 2007). Furthermore, lack of e-records readiness remains a big challenge in African countries and Malawi in particular since majority of studies on e-records in Africa have largely focused on management of e-records, with very little in-depth in understanding e-records readiness (Kalusopa, 2011).

5. Methodology

The study was employed as a case study design in which a mixed method was adopted. Both qualitative and quantitative techniques were used. The study was conducted at Karonga Town Councils targeting staff working in the Registry and other departments. The study also adapted a modified questionnaire by Kalusopa (2011:348-349) on e-records readiness of labour organisations in Botswana. About 35 Survey questionnaires were randomly distributed to different staff responsible for creating and

capturing records in their respective departments. Data collections tools were pre-tested and all the ambiguities were corrected before they were finally administered to the participants. Survey questionnaire were analysed descriptively using Microsoft Excel Package where tables, pie charts and percentages were used to present and interpret data. Permission to conduct the study was sought from the Karonga District Commissioner.

6. Results and Discussion

6.1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table1: Showing demographic information of respondents

Variable	Frequency (N=29)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	19	65.5
Female	10	34.5
Department		
Planning	3	10.3
Administration	9	31.0
Human resources	5	17.2
Registry	6	20.7
Finance	4	13.8
Other	2	6.9
Position		
Director	2	6.9
Records Clerk	7	24.1
ICT Officer	2	6.9
Supervisor	4	13.8
Secretary	3	10.3
Other	9	31.0
Qualifications		
JCE	11	37.9
MSCE	8	27.6
Professional	5	17.2
Diploma	4	13.8
Degree and above	1	3.4

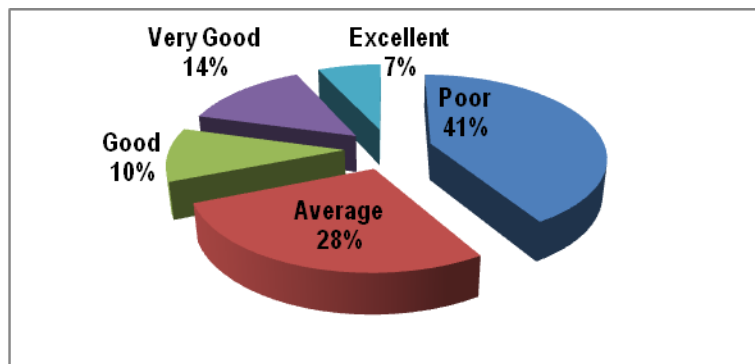
As shown in Table 1, 65.5% (19) were males while 34.5% (10) were females. About 31.0% (9) of respondents were from administration department, 20.3% (6) were from Registry department, 17.2% (5) from Human resources while very few respondents came from other departments. Furthermore, 31.0% (9) of respondents hold other position apart from the one that were listed, 24.1(7) were records clerk, while 13.8%(4) were supervisors and only 6.9%(2) were directors who participated in the survey. About 37.9% (11) had Junior certificate of Education (JCE), 27.6%(8) had Malawi School certificate of Education (MSCE), 17.2%(4) were holders of professional certificates and only 3.4%(1) had degrees or above. This implies that majority of respondents who participated in the survey were males. A substantial number of respondents were from

Administration, Registry and Human resources departments. In addition, majority of participants were holders of other positions, followed by records clerks and secretaries. It also indicates that majority of participants were junior certificate holders and MSCE holders with very few holding diplomas.

6.2. Internal and public awareness of e-records management programme

The second objective was to ascertain internal and public awareness of e-records management programme at KTC as presented in **Figure 2**. According to IRMT (2004:12) posits that although government agency may have adequate records management policies, procedures and resources, these many not be effective unless there is commitment to implement them. This implies that managers and staff need to be aware of the importance of trustworthy and well-managed records for delivering effective government services and protecting institutional accountability and integrity. The current study established that internal and public awareness of e-records by managers and staff at KTC was poor (41%) and average (28%). This could be attributed to lack of appreciation of the importance of managing records. The study concurs with Moalthod (2015) who reported that only 45% of staff were aware of e-records management at Botswana Ministry of Labour Headquarters due lack of orientation programme. Increasing awareness campaigns about records management programme help users understand procedures and their responsibilities and finally appreciate importance of well-managed records for delivering effective public services and protecting institutional accountability and integrity (Shepherd & Yeo, 2003; IRMT, 2004).

Figure 2: Extent of internal and public awareness about e-records at KTC



6.3. Tools and procedures for E-records management

The third objective of the study was to examine the availability of the tools and procedures for managing e-records at KTC. E-records and information management policies must be supported by tools and procedures to ensure effective policy implementation. These tools and procedures include standard forms and templates; classification schemes, security procedures, manuals, systems backups etc. (IRMT,2004: 9). The current study revealed that 58.6%(17) of respondents indicated that central filing systems for managing e-records was poor, 44.8%(13) of respondents said access to e-records was average due to lack of proper classification and search retrieval techniques, while at least half of the respondents, 51.7% (15) indicated security measures to protect records. This implies that the status of e-records readiness on availability of tools and procedures for e-records management was weak.

Table 2: Existence of tools and procedures for e-records management

E-records Readiness indicator (s)	Extent of E-Records Readiness									
	Key: 1=poor, 2= average, 3= good, 4=very good, 5=Excellent									
	1		2		3		4		5	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
There is a central filing systems (eg. storage management systems, central file directory, electronic document management systems) for filing, storage and classifications of records at your organization	17	58.6	2	6.9	5	17.2	1	3.4	4	13.8
E-records are easy to access KTC due to proper classification, metadata or effective search retrieval techniques	10	34.5	13	44.8	3	10.3	2	6.9	1	3.4
There are security measures and access protocols adequate to protect the records at KTC	4	13.8	15	51.7	2	6.9	5	17.2	3	10.3

6.4. E-records management products and technologies available at KTC

Another e-records readiness assessment sought to examine the availability for e-records management products and technologies at KTC. Over the past decades, a number of technologies and products for managing e-records have entered into the industry and market (Kalusopa, 20011). These among others include Enterprise management Systems, Electronic Document Records Management Systems. These technologies and product solutions are meant to provide capability to capture, classify, store, and retrieve and track e-records regardless of the format (IRMT, 2004: 10).

Therefore, it was important to measure the extent to which these technologies and products were available at KTC as indicated in **Table 3**.

Table 3: Existence of e-records products and technologies at KTC

E-records Readiness Indicator(s)	Extent of E-Records Readiness									
	Key: 1=Poor, 2= Average, 3= Good, 4=Very good, 5=Excellent									
	1		2		3		4		5	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
There is recognition of the need to integrate e-records requirements and product solutions into existing systems	3	10.3	19	65.5	4	13.8	2	6.9	1	3.4
There is a system at KTC that has been implemented and adequate attention has been paid to the need to streamline and integrate workflow across departments/units that the system supports	7	24.1	14	48.3	2	6.9	2	6.9	4	13.8
There is a system at KTC that has been implemented with consideration being given to how the records created will be integrated with other government systems	2	6.9	1	3.4	2	6.9	11	37.9	13	44.8

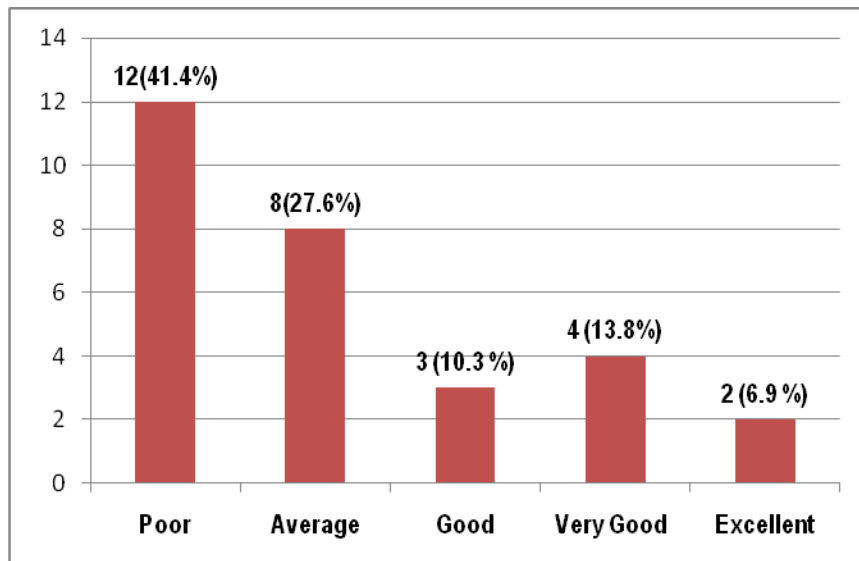
As evident in Table 3, the study revealed that recognition to integrate e-records requirements and product solutions into existing systems was average, 65.5% (19); the existence of a system being implemented to streamline workflow across departments was rated average, 48.3 % (14), while the capability KTC to implement the systems with consideration given to how records will be created with government systems was excellent, 44.8% (13). This implied that e-records readiness on e-records products and technologies was inadequate. For this reason, Kalusopa (2011) posits that labour and public agency like KTC should recognise the need to integrate e-records requirements and products solutions into existing systems for future ICT systems.

6.5. Policies and responsibilities for e-records management

The fourth e-records readiness assessment indicator sought to establish availability of policies and responsibilities for e-records management at KTC. Respondents were asked to rate (poor, average, good, very good and excellent) as presented in **Figure 3**. IRMT (2004:7) e-records readiness tool underscores the need for government agency

that implements e-government services to establish internal policies and responsibilities for e-records and information management. This makes it easier for staff within the agency to apply these policies and responsibilities to specific business functions and processes. Therefore, the current study revealed that 41.4% (12) of respondents indicated poor while 6.9% (2) indicated excellent. This meant that the status of e-record readiness at KTC when it comes to availability of policies and responsibilities for management of records low. Mnjama and Wamukoya (2007) observe that an organisational commitment to e-records management is gauged by the existence or non-existence records policies and procedures. The authors argue further that staff managing records need to be qualified and have clear defined responsibilities. Similar scholars have echoed same sentiments that lack of policies and capacity in terms of records management skills among staff remain a big problem in the public sector in developing countries (Mnjama & Wamukoya, 2007; Nengomasha, 2009; Kalusopa, 2011).

Figure 3: Availability of policies and responsibilities of e-records at KTC



6.6. Resources and training needs for e-records management

Although any organisation may have well established records management policies, procedures, tools and standards, these would not be effective, if they are not by qualified records management staff, with adequate resources, funds and equipment to support implementation of these policies (IRMT, 2004). Therefore, this e-records

readiness assessment indicator sought to ascertain existence of the resources and training needs for e-records management at Karonga Town Council as presented in **Table 4**. The study established that 44.8% (13) of respondents indicated that existence of records management unit was good, 55.2% (16) indicated training of staff managing e-records was poor, while 48.3% (16) indicated that poor adequate resources were located for managing e-records. This implied that resources and training needs for e-records were low despite the existence of records management unit at KTC. Earlier studies by IRMT (2004) and Mnjama and Wamkoya (2007) confirm that majority of countries in developing countries including the ESARBICA region are grappling up with inadequate resources and lack qualified staff for managing e-records in the public sectors. Therefore, there is a need for allocations of more resources and well-qualified staff for records management.

Table 4: Availability of resources and training needs for e-records at KTC

E-records Readiness indicator (s)	Extent of E-Records Readiness									
	Key: 1=poor, 2= average, 3= good, 4=very good, 5=Excellent									
	1		2		3		4		5	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
There is a designed records management unit/Registry at KTC	5	17.1	9	31.0	13	44.8	1	3.4	3	10.3
Staff have adequate training in e-records management	16	55.2	3	10.3	7	24.1	2	6.9	1	3.4
Adequate resources are allocated to manage e-records at KTC	14	48.3	6	20.7	2	6.9	5	17.1	2	6.9

7. Conclusion and Recommendation

Overall, the study revealed that e-records readiness at Karonga Town Council was low and evolving as evidenced by low internal and public awareness about e-records, inadequate tools and procedures, as well as products and technologies for managing e-records. The study also established absence of policies and procedures, lack of resources, no training needs and poor responsibilities for e-records management. Therefore, among others the study recommends the advocacy for internal awareness of records, management, development of records management policies and well-defined responsibilities for managing records at KTC, more staff need to be trained in records management and adequate allocation of resources. This should be supported by the top management at the Karonga Town Council.

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