



Importance of Records Management in a Crisis

With the far-reaching implications of COVID-19 as the backdrop, leaders in the areas of archives and records management were diligently working to provide guidelines upon which all agencies should manage records and information during a crisis. In May 2020, the International Council on Archives (ICA) and the International Conference of Information Commissioners, supported by ARMA International, CODATA, Digital Preservation Coalition, Research Data Alliance, UNESCO Memory of the World and World Data System, developed the following statement, **“COVID-19: The duty to document does not cease in a crisis, it becomes more essential”**.¹

In a crisis, the immediate response is usually one of panic and confusion then in such circumstances there is a tendency to deviate from standard operating procedures. This may lead to a failure to document and preserve aspects of our business necessary for continuity. It is, however, important to document each step in a process or activity, as well as decisions made, as evidence of an event or transaction for historical, economical, legal or social purposes. For instance, records from the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic provided insight into behaviours and patterns that prevailed at that time. This gave the leaders of the world access into how things were managed - failures and successes - to determine the best approach in addressing the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, if the medical specialists had not been recording and monitoring trends related to the symptoms and changes with the Covid-19 virus over time, then a vaccine may not have been possible one year after the first recorded case.

¹ “COVID-19: The Duty to Document does not Cease in a Crisis, It becomes more Essential.” 4 May 2020. The Research Data Alliance. Online. 21 February 2021. <https://www.rd-alliance.org/sites/default/files/attachment/covid_the_duty_to_document_is_essential.pdf>.

From the world's experience with this and previous crises, organisations must be more flexible in their approach to the management of records. This is especially important as it relates to the digitisation of records and the implementation of processes that would facilitate remote work and the ease of access to records and information. With the shift from normal to a hybrid working arrangement over the past two years, the Trinidad and Tobago Securities and Exchange Commission (TTSEC), like the rest of the country, was forced to re-think the existing working model and adjust to present day realities. This involved analysing, revising and adapting how records and information are captured, stored and made accessible to stakeholders.

Given the agility required from regulators internationally in responding to the shock, market participants were encouraged to submit records electronically. The TTSEC facilitated the electronic submission of records and also amended policies and procedures to facilitate the management of records and information remotely. The relevant staff of the TTSEC were also trained on revised processes and sensitised on new requirements.

The following are suggested approaches which can be useful:

1. Decisions must be documented capturing the who, where, what, how and why of the matter.
2. All Records and data must be secured and preserved.
 - a. All decisions must be communicated through safe channels to all staff and stored in a central location for ease of access.
3. If you are working remotely while managing a hybrid records environment, create a schedule to allow for routine visits to your records centres to conduct facilities checks which must include the following:
 - a. Ensure AC units are working at optimum levels and any changes in temperatures are observed as soon as they occur, to minimise any long-term impacts on the records.
 - b. Ensure that all alarms and fire suppression units are still functional so that in the event of an emergency, the organisation can be confident that there is some degree of protection for your records.
4. The security, preservation and access to digital content can be facilitated during a crisis.

- a. Consider the use of an electronic document and records management system (EDRMS) that will provide access to records and information, whilst making the remote administration of records easier.
 - b. There should be routine security audits of the EDRMS to ensure that the standards set are being maintained and any breaches observed are addressed in a timely manner.
5. Consider revisions to existing policies or the creation of new ones to manage records created via social media, as well as via web conferencing applications.
6. The value of an archival system is in its use and not its storage. In other words, digitise all of your paper records. Storing records in a format that is not easily accessible in a crisis is useless.
7. Finally, ensure your company has a digital transformation strategy that will allow for ‘the integration of technology in all areas of your business.’

In conclusion, as we return to work in a forever changed environment, which is recognised globally as records and information month, let us not forget one of the salient lessons of this pandemic experience, that *“records are essential to the continued life of an Organisation and the records service is as essential as any other.”*²

² “COVID-19: The Duty to Document does not Cease in a Crisis, It becomes more Essential.” 4 May 2020. The Research Data Alliance. Online. 21 February 2021. <https://www.rd-alliance.org/sites/default/files/attachment/covid_the_duty_to_document_is_essential.pdf>.

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