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Unlocking digital records: enhancing accessibility for effective records management at Zomba District Council in Malawi

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Abstract

Digital records' accessibility is important for the management of digital records, especially in environments with limited resources like district councils in Malawi. The efficient accessibility of digital records enhances administrative procedures, promotes transparency, and supports informed decision-making. This study examined the challenges and opportunities related to digital records accessibility at the Zomba District Council in Malawi. It focused on factors such as infrastructure limitations, technological capacity, policy frameworks, and user competencies. Applying a qualitative case study methodology, data were collected through interviews with council staff, observations of records management practices, and the analysis of relevant documents. The findings revealed that accessibility of digital records at Zomba District Council is significantly hindered by the absence of institutional policies, inadequate ICT infrastructure, unreliable power supply, and limited staff digital competencies. Furthermore, the lack of proper storage and retrieval mechanisms compromised the long-term preservation of digital records. The study recommends investment in comprehensive digital infrastructure, training of personnel in digital records management, and the formulation of clear policies to enhance accessibility and sustainability. Zomba district council can enhance service delivery, accountability, and governance by addressing these challenges. This research contributes to the broader discourse on digital records management in public institutions operating in resource-limited settings.

Keywords: accessibility, digital records, digital records management, infrastructure, policy, preservation, standards

Introduction and background

Digital records management has become a cornerstone of effective governance globally, with most institutions moving towards fully digitised systems that enhance accountability, transparency, and efficiency in service delivery (Oganga 2016). Digital records, if appropriately administered and easily accessed, improve the process of making decisions, openness, and the collective knowledge, expertise and information held in public institutions (Matlala, Ncube & Parbanath 2022). Nationally, records systems in many district councils across the country are disjointed, inadequately digitised, or completely paper-based, and cannot

easily function together due to a lack of common standards or protocols (Padoni, Chipeta & Chawinga 2024).

The Zomba District Council, situated in the southeastern region of Malawi, provides public services to nearly 800,000 residents. The council administers significant functions through various departments, such as education, health, social welfare, public works, and district planning. These departments generate enormous volumes of records varying from school enrolment statistics, payroll data, procurement files, meeting minutes, land registration records, and social welfare records. The council, formerly reliant on physical records management systems, has commenced with a shift to digital records management in step with international and national advances. This shift, however, has given rise to parallel records management practices across departments, where some records are manually produced and subsequently digitised, while others are born digital, albeit in disjointed ways. This hybrid approach, where different departments generate records in fragmented approaches, creates significant inefficiencies, leading to disjointed recordkeeping, thereby impeding continuous digital records accessibility across departments, occasioning delays when officers undertake to retrieve records.

This study is therefore significant, as it sought to evaluate the existing records management practices, policies and institutional frameworks influencing digital records accessibility at the council. Beyond ascertaining prevailing gaps and conceivable opportunities, this study aimed to proffer strategies that bring the council's records management practices in line with national priorities, along with universally recognised records management standards. Ultimately, enhancing digital records management at the council is not merely for adhering to technical requirements for management of digital records. It also exemplifies an important step towards improving the accessibility of the council's digital records, which is essential to instituting more transparent, efficient, and responsive district information governance that prioritises citizen needs and engagement.

Problem statement

Efficient records management in public institutions leads to the obtaining precise, accessible, and timely information (Casadesús de Mingo & Cerrillo-i-Martínez 2018). Despite the transition to digital records management, the Zomba District Council continues to encounter significant obstacles in its efforts to manage and access digital records efficiently. One of the key obstacles is the inadequacy of ICT infrastructure, which consists of limited hardware and software resources essential for vigorous digital records management. The council also grapples with an unpredictable power supply and constant glitches in internet connectivity, both of which impose additional limitations on the capacity to sustain and retrieve digital records regularly. Inadequate finances also aggravate these issues, impeding the council's ability to invest in the necessary technological enhancements and digital skills development for officers. Without regular and targeted training opportunities, officers are more liable to misfile, lose, or erroneously handle digital records, which leads to retrieval challenges, decreased efficiency, and a greater potential for errors. Furthermore, the absence of secure and reliable digital archival storage at the council greatly aggravates these challenges. In contrast to international and regional best practices, where digitisation programmes are guided by vigorous policies and persistent investing in infrastructure and skills development (Gesmundo, Glorioso, Raviz & Apat 2022), Zomba District Council significantly lags. This situation demonstrates both national challenges connected with resource limitations (Zharima, Griffiths

& Goudge 2023) and distinctive homegrown issues linked to institutional policy, skills, and digital records management practices.

In the context of decentralised governance, where district councils are anticipated to accomplish local development proficiently, the inability to access digital records destabilises their ability to strategise, track, and report on crucial functions (Hussein 2017). Therefore, recognising and addressing the precise obstacles to digital records accessibility in district councils is vital for reinforcing records management, stimulating openness, and utilising technology to improve the provision of services and civic engagement in the public sector.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to examine the obstacles or difficulties and the strategies for improving accessibility to digital records as a means of reinforcing efficient records management in a district council in Malawi, with a focus on Zomba District Council. In resource-constrained environments such as Malawi's local government authorities, challenges including limited ICT infrastructure, insufficient budgets, poor technical skills, and disjointed digital systems persist to inhibit access to vital digital records (Adu & Ngulube 2017; Akporhonor 2020). By examining existing practices, institutional arrangements, and the technological context within the council, the study intended to discover the leading enablers of and barriers to accessing digital records.

Objectives of the study

The primary goal of this study was to assess and recommend practical approaches for improving accessibility to digital records in a resource-constrained district council in Malawi to enhance efficient digital records management. The specific objectives were as follows:

- a. To assess the current level of digital records accessibility within Zomba District Council, with consideration to technological infrastructure and human resource capacity.
- b. To identify the main obstacles and impediments that reduce access to digital records in a resource-constrained municipal context.
- c. To appraise the prevailing policies, practices, and institutional frameworks that either enable or deter the access and administration of digital records within the council.
- d. To examine staff awareness, skills, and attitudes concerning access to digital records and their input to improving access to digital records.
- e. To recommend approaches and interventions directed at enhancing digital records accessibility and stimulating a viable culture of digital records management within municipal settings.

Literature review

The shift from conventional to digital records management is regarded as essential for refining administrative competence, service delivery, and openness in public institutions, as well as local governments (Kumar 2024). Digital records should be captured and managed in a way that ensures that they will be conveniently accessible during their entire lifecycle (Matlala et al. 2022). Public institutions should encourage and arrange for the extensive accessibility of digital records while considering lawful and proper access limitations, as well as legislative and privacy requirements (Musembe, Kwanya & Chweya 2025). However, it is imperative to

recognise that in resource-limited settings such as Zomba District Council, access to digital records remains a substantial challenge (Zharima et al. 2023). This literature review examined the accessibility of digital records in local government settings, focused on main obstacles, and scrutinises programmes designed to enhance access in resource-limited settings. Accessibility of digital records is contingent on the availability of suitable hardware and software, consisting of computers, applications for processing and analysis of data, and hardware components that allow users to enter data and instructions into computer systems (Atah & Akeke 2024). Accessibility is not established by technology alone but occurs due to the interaction of structure and organisation of systems, infrastructure, application of digital skills, policy frameworks, and organisational culture (Botelho 2021). It entails both tangible assets, such as hardware and internet connectivity, and rational assets, including file formats, metadata, and classification systems (Kulkarni 2019). The swift enhancement of technology dictates consistent upgrades to software and hardware systems to conserve the usability and reliability of delicate digital records (Matlala et al. 2022).

Several issues hamper access to digital records in settings where there is a significant lack of resources, including infrastructure, digital tools and devices, servers, bandwidth, and recurrent power failures, making it problematic to operate digital systems successfully (Al Meslamani 2023). These obstacles are widespread in Malawian district councils, where inadequate financing for information technology persists (Hettinger et al. 2021). Local government institutions encounter a scarcity of skilled officers in records management and information technology (Hettinger et al. 2021). Municipal officers are often deficient in rudimentary digital knowledge, let alone the specific skills required for digital protection or metadata organisation (Debbarma & Sharma 2023). Weak policy and institutional frameworks further deter access to digital records, particularly in the absence of established procedures on access control, maintenance, protection, and interoperability. Digital records often continue to be disjointed and incompetently managed (Makoza 2023). Chigariro and Khumalo (2018) observed that various organisations in sub-Saharan Africa experience an inability of the structures and systems to efficiently deliver on their intended functions. In the process, they lack robust records management policies, procedures, and realistic standards, which further exacerbates the situation (Chigariro & Khumalo 2018).

Recognised policies guarantee the structure of generating, moderating, and maintaining records works efficiently (Gesmundo et al. 2022). Constrictions on financing ICT infrastructure due to limited government resources also exacerbate the situation, because funds are often redirected to pressing service delivery needs (Hettinger et al. 2021). This results in a situation where digital systems are implemented sporadically and are heavily reliant on external funding and creates conditions that are unsustainable for the long term (Thapa 2020). Damawan and Azizah (2020) opine that ingrained rules, procedures and structures that characterise a bureaucracy, apprehension of advanced technology, and poor managerial guidance obstruct mechanisms of enhancing accessibility to digital records. Decentralisation in the country, which was initiated in 1998 through the decentralisation policy, was aimed at improving accountability, openness and the receptiveness of duty bearers in planning and implementing local development initiatives (Hussein 2019). However, despite the implementation of decentralisation policy and enactment of the Local Government Act, there are noticeable constraints hindering local development planning, and the subsequent gaps between what was envisaged in the decentralisation policy and practical application in municipal council settings (Hussein 2019). These gaps and limitations have led to significant obstacles, especially in obtaining funding for records management and information systems (Fleck, Jangia & Delbridge 2023).

Furthermore, a rising body of research specifies that staff attitudes and enthusiasm for digital transformation are decisive factors in the actual implementation of digital records systems in resource-limited environments (Radu 2023). Developing skills for users and reinforcing commitment to build an internal ownership approach can catalyse access even before digital systems are installed (Debbarma & Sharma 2023). Although research on digital governance and digital transformation is intensifying, there is still a dearth of empirical research particularly addressing digital records management at the district level in Malawi (Padoni et al. 2024; Malanga & Kamanga 2018). Most studies focus on digital records management in sectors such as health (Msiska, Kunitawa & Kunitawa 2017; Tizifa et al., 2021), some on education (Chaputula 2022; Phiri & Tough 2018), while others often generalise findings at the national level or focus on public institutions (Msosa, Chawinga & Chipeta, 2023; Hettinger et al. 2021), overlooking the particular issues encountered by rural and semi-urban councils. Although digital records management is indispensable for municipal institutions in all phases of development, both the computerisation of office procedures and the enactment of digital records enterprises have yet to be given prominence (Mokhtar & Yusof 2016). Furthermore, inadequate consideration has been given to the perceptions of frontline users, such as administrative officers and records officers, whose direct involvement is decisive in grasping the obstacles to digital records accessibility (Jirata, Natarajan & Negasa 2018; Gesmundo et al. 2022). Another gap is that international standards and models for digital records management are frequently overlooked in the implementation of digital records systems, resulting in systems that may be technically robust but are practically inaccessible (Sigauke 2022).

Enhancing access to digital records in the resource-constrained Zomba District Council in Malawi necessitates more than merely installing technology; it also requires tackling the discrepancies in access to technology and digital literacy (Debbarma & Sharma 2023). Securing extensive access to technology and developing user abilities are indispensable for all individuals (Debbarma & Sharma 2023). This involves setting up comprehensive guidelines and providing instruction and scholastic opportunities to make certain that stakeholders, irrespective of experience, can utilise computers and the internet for conventional responsibilities (Debbarma & Sharma 2023). It also requires an all-inclusive approach that blends infrastructure expansion, development of policies, skills development, and shifts in institutional culture (Gesmundo et al. 2022).

Methodology

This study utilised a qualitative case study approach to investigate the obstacles, enablers, and pragmatic approaches for enhancing accessibility to digital records in a resource-constrained Zomba District Council in Malawi. The qualitative design was selected because it enables researchers to do an in-depth exploration of complex, context-specific phenomena, such as experiences, practices, and institutional cultures, that could not be readily captured through quantitative methods (Bhangu, Provost & Caduff, 2023). In this instance, the study aimed to examine the management of digital records at Zomba District Council, rendering a qualitative inquiry the most suitable methodological approach (Bleiker, Morgan-Trimmers, Knapp, & Hopkins, 2019).

The study applied a case study design, focusing on the Zomba District Council as an illustrative sample of a municipal institution undertaking digital transition while hindered by inadequate resources. This approach was chosen because it enabled the examination of the intricate and contextual factors influencing digital records management at the council (Thomas 2021).

To properly tackle the research objectives, the study used multiple qualitative data collection methods. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants chosen through purposive sampling from the administrative, planning, IT, and records management units. These participants were selected because of their level of involvement in managing and operating digital records within the council. Semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to obtain detailed insights while maintaining flexibility to probe emerging issues as they arose during data collection (Islam & Aldaihan 2022). Direct observations of routine operations were also conducted between March and April 2024. This afforded the researcher firsthand insights into routine records management practices and facilitated understanding of both formal procedures and informal workarounds, revealing gaps between policy and practice (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2018). Document analysis encompassed evaluating institutional documents, for instance, policy guides, procedural handbooks, and records management instructions to comprehend the prescribed frameworks governing records management. To maintain anonymity and confidentiality, each interview participant was assigned a unique numeric code (1-15) corresponding with their order of participation, while observational notes and documents were systematically coded to maintain consistency during analysis.

Data were analysed through thematic analysis, a process that systematically identifies patterns and themes within qualitative data sets (Morgan 2022). The reflexive approach by Braun and Clarke (2021) was implemented, encompassing six iterative stages: familiarisation, coding, theme generation, review and refinement of themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. Data were imported into ATLAS.ti, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), which enabled systematic coding and theme development (Mastrobattista, Muñoz-Rico & Cordon-García 2024).

The study acquired ethical clearance from the National Commission for Science and Technology (NCST), the recognised ethical review board in Malawi. Prior to their involvement, participants were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits (Kang & Hwang 2023). All participants proffered written informed consent and were assured of both confidentiality and anonymity for the duration of the study (Badampudi, Fotrousi, Cartaxo & Usman 2022). This aspect nurtured an environment in which participants were relaxed, offering honest feedback.

Findings

This section presents and analyses the key findings of the study, organised under six thematic areas: The current level of digital records generation and accessibility; institutional frameworks: structural and digital records management implementation levels; main obstacles and impediments that reduce access to digital records accessibility; evaluation of the prevailing policies, practices, and institutional frameworks that either enable or deter the access; and staff awareness, skills, and attitudes concerning access to digital records. These findings were examined in relation to the objectives of the study, existing literature and the context of resource-limited environments.

The current level of digital records generation and accessibility

When records are properly generated, organised, and managed, they enable an orderly move towards the circulation of information among public institutions, interested parties, and corporate officers. In this way it facilitates their administrative practices (Huda 2022). This

section explores the nature and types of digital records generated at the council, highlighting the types of records generated and departmental variations. For example, Participants 4, 3 and 7 highlighted that various types of digital records were generated and used at the council. Below are excerpts from Participants 4, 3 and 7, respectively:

The answer is yes, a lot of things we do digitally, like we have drawings, designs and even emails we correspond with contractors, they are all in digital.

Others are system generated, for example, staff records, let's say the payroll management, is system generated; we have all information, like who is receiving what and at what grade. That is system generated.

Of course, currently with deceased estates management, we have documents that we send to stakeholders like the High Court, magistrates' courts, legal aid bureau, so we can just scan the document.

The findings showed a wide variety of digital records at the Zomba District Council, manifesting departmental functions and administrative requirements. Participants recognised that records, including engineering drawings, correspondence with contractors, payroll data, and scanned documents for deceased estates management, are frequently produced and stored digitally. These findings reinforce Huda's (2022) assertion that systematic generation and organising of records improve the competent flow of information, which in turn strengthens institutional operations. For instance, correspondence records operate as both administrative resources and instruments for safeguarding accountability. Similarly, digitised documents handled in estate management indicate the transition in the direction of electronic workflows within legal and social service contexts. However, the dependence on system-generated records, together with impromptu scanned records, underscores the council's hybrid records management practices, whereby both digital and manual processes function collaboratively. The variation observed among departments indicates both potential benefits and complexities regarding standardising digital records management practices.

Institutional frameworks: structural and digital records management implementation levels

The council exhibits varying degrees of digital records management adoption across its departments. But generally, very few departments have fully gone digital in their records management, as was alluded to by Participant 3 below:

I think we are not doing pretty well, because it's like something business as usual, if you want information to do with chiefs, you create a database of chiefs, thus the only information you have, but something like the deep down of records management, digital records management, that is not being practised here, that is what I can say.

The level of digital records management implementation differs considerably between various sectors and departments of the council. Generally, from the observations and discussions with participants, there was a noticeable sense that the administration of digital records within the divisions and sections at the council is incoherent and disconnected with each sector implementing its blueprint and method (Ambira, Kemoni & Ngulube 2019). The difference in implementation levels is motivated by considerations related to departmental financial support, the kind of services performed by the department and the availability of infrastructure to support digital records implementation. The finance department is among the few departments

at the council that have implemented a digital system with a robust integrated financial management system (IFMIS) that facilitates the handling of financial matters digitally, establishing competent tracking of transactions (Gcora & Chigona, 2019). IFMIS was initiated in Malawi as part of public financial management reforms to improve financial plan implementation, documentation of financial activities, and openness in the utilisation of public finances (Gcora & Chigona 2019). The implementation of IFMIS turned into a significant benchmark for most emerging economies' restructuring of budgeting processes (Macharia & Dominic 2019). The country initiated the implementation of IFMIS processes at the central government level in 2005, while local government operations began in 2009 (Laizer & Sumo 2017). IFMIS automates and mechanises crucial features of budget implementation and accounting system processes throughout public establishments and presents several gains, together with better quality budget organisation (Tetteh, Muda, Susuawu, Sunu & Aneyire 2022). However, according to participants at the council, the current version of IFMIS implemented at the council is more of a business process system whereby it can generate and create documents, but the final record is printed out and kept manually. This feature creates challenges in terms of the storage of records, as voluminous transactions done through IFMIS have to be completed manually, resulting in huge volumes of records that are stored manually.

The district council also utilises the human resources management information system in collaboration with the Department of Human Resources Management and Development (DHRMD). Participant 7 stated that:

Of course, we really maintain systems that we have found, you talk about human resources management information system, we have staff returns for our employees at the council, such kind of records.

Whereas Participant 8 explained the types of records generated in HRMIS at the council and stated that:

Payroll in HRMIS, staff returns and HR reports

It is pertinent to understand that in Malawi, DHRMD, a directorate under the Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC), manages public service officers in the best interests of the secretary to the office of president and Cabinet (Dzimhiri 2016). In this regard, most of the employee, payroll, and performance management records across the public sector are processed through HRMIS, thereby enabling effective human resource controls in conformity with various labour-related laws (Dzimhiri 2016). The Government of Malawi, through the DHRMD, established an Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) for human resources information management and planning, which is interoperable and can be customised (Government of Malawi 2017). As such, district councils like Zomba are connected to this system, where they manage all issues related to employees at the council who are under the government payroll.

Main obstacles and impediments that reduce access to digital records accessibility

Participants reported recurrent technical problems in retrieving digital files owing to outdated software, inconsistent internet connectivity, and insufficient server capacity. For example, Participants 2 and 7 raised the following issues related to infrastructure at the council as being obstacles to the effective implementation of digital records management, respectively:

We have challenges, the issue of internet is on and off, so sometimes you want to work, you find out that you don't have internet, and the network has gone, so these issues is what hampers us to access various systems in terms of digital records.

You know we have these network hiccups, which forces officers to use their own gadgets for tethering and internet. Government wide area network (GWAN) sometimes is down for several days, persistent blackouts and lack of backup power; those are the challenges that we are facing.

As highlighted by Participant 7, officers frequently utilise informal alternatives when digital systems become inaccessible or unavailable. These informal alternatives include the utilisation of personal devices or the transmission of documents through unsanctioned communication channels. These spontaneous strategies, while easing immediate access and continuity of operations, may unintentionally compromise the integrity, security, and auditability of digital records. These practices also underline systemic challenges encountered by the council, including inadequate technical support structures and the absence of standardised protocols governing digital records management. Availability of digital records may be threatened if there are no established procedures to guarantee their continued accessibility and maintenance (Sigauke 2022). The council should bear in mind that it should regulate the retrieval of its records, especially those that comprise private and operative information, which should be safeguarded against unsanctioned retrieval (Muchaonyera 2017).

Furthermore, participants acknowledged that while there is a generation of records and digital processing of records at the council, digital filing will not be fully implemented, and, currently, there is an over-reliance on manual storage of records. For example, Participants 1, 3, 7 and 13 stated as follows, respectively:

As I have already indicated, most of the information processed at the council in terms of origination tend to be created digitally, but when it comes to storage, it is where we are having a challenge there. So, almost all the information reports, vouchers, this and that will be processed digitally, but when it comes to storage, we will rely on manual filing, that is where most of the manual information is.

People do have gadgets in their offices, they know digital records, they receive digital records, but the storage of the digital records is done anyhow; for them to manage that is problematic.

At the meantime, in terms of digital filing, we are not there yet, we are still using the old manual system of filing, but only maybe we just transfer little information about our employees into the system.

But meanwhile, we find it easy using the system and right now we also have another one, the Dropbox and every district has its own Dropbox account, and as a district, you can put in all the work you are doing; everything can be kept there. I think it is being embraced by and by, people are still adopting it, but surely in future it is going to be great.

One pertinent issue elaborated on by Participants 1, 3 and 7 was that the council had digital systems for generating and managing records. However, despite this, these records were filed manually. However, Participant 13 suggested that the council was gradually transitioning to digital storage, with some departments already adopting cloud storage facilities like Dropbox. These were so because there was no suitable infrastructure for absorbing digital records into safe storage at the district council (Matlala et al. 2022). This is notwithstanding the fact that equipment for digital records storage is swiftly on the rise, and many new variants of digital

storage systems move into the market (Samiee & Davallu 2014). While organisations generally manage workstations to help in several aspects of the institution's records management, they are still generating progressively more physical records that are put in storage as 'record copies' (Ntengenyane & Masenya 2022).

Participants also alluded to the challenge at the council of having certain digital information not properly captured in the records management systems at the council. This challenge arose mainly because the council was generating records digitally and corresponding electronically, but most filing was done manually, and that created a gap whereby some information was not filed manually but has been processed digitally and acted on. For example, Participant 10 explained that:

Obviously, I can say because sometimes managers are dealing with the issues at the top there without bringing the documents to the registry for filing, so certainly there will be that gap. I said there is a gap in as far as records that are managed digitally.

The administration of digital content is a persistent issue in publicly owned institutions, because there is usually no technical infrastructure to accommodate and support the retrieval of digital information appropriately (Chowdhury, McLeod, Lihoma, Teferra & Wato 2023).

Evaluation of the prevailing policies, practices, and institutional frameworks that either enable or deter access

When probed particularly on the existence of a records management policy at the council, participants disclosed that the council did not have a records management policy. Participants 1, 3 and 12 stated the following, respectively:

What is very critical and important for us is that we should ensure that records management policies are put in place and are being used. Otherwise, if there is no management support any system cannot prosper.

I think lack of laid-down policies by the council itself is what is hindering digital records management. Had it been that we had specific policies on how we can manage digital records, we would have been somewhere else.

Not a policy as such, of course, for cash transfers, there are some guidelines, we just have guidelines whereby if each and every person has access to information, some might tamper with information, so the guidelines give access to few individuals so to avoid tampering with information.

The participants' observations underscored that digital records' accessibility at Zomba District Council is hampered by the nonexistence of a formal records management policy, leading to dependence on disjointed, system-specific directives. Participants underlined that without policy frameworks specific to the council, digital records systems would remain unsupported and fragmented at the institutional level. For instance, Participant 1 emphasised the necessity for management commitment to policy development, observing that "any system cannot prosper" in the absence of structured policy frameworks. Participant 3 reaffirmed this observation, ascribing the council's constrained progress to the absence of structured policies tailored to its operational realities. Similarly, Participant 12 explained that only informal guidelines existed, specifically in relation to cash transfer records, which were designed as access controls, limiting information availability to designated officers to reduce the risk of data manipulation. These perceptions aligned with Chigariro and Khumalo (2018), who

contend that institutional policies are indispensable for steering digital records management practices and enabling impartial information access, strong accountability mechanisms, and transparent administrative practices in public sector organisations. Participants 2, 7 and 9 also articulated that they communicated electronically and used emails for communication. The excerpts of their interviews are provided below:

Some are using personal emails, while some are using institutional emails.

I think we just trust that when you send something electronically through email, you will be able to access it as long as you are remembering your password. And that's what we do when you have an important document, and you want to keep it for a long time, we simply scan it and probably send it through email because we know that anytime you can access it.

Through observations during the study, it was noticed that the council used email communications to correspond with stakeholders, contractors, clients, and the public. Some officers even indicated that they used emails for the storage of important documents. Mosweu and Bwalya (2022) refer to the use of emails by public officers in Botswana, but they explain that email handling was not coherent, as personal email accounts were utilised for handling formal institutional communications while the officers had institutional email accounts. Similarly, from the interactions with participants at the council, it was evident that council employees used emails in their operations and mostly relied on personal emails to transact official business, and there was no policy guidance on its usage. In the absence of a policy, it is important for the council to implement guidelines and procedures for the use of email correspondence at the institution (Letmathe & Noll 2024).

Institutional policies on email management might help public officers to understand suitable approaches to utilising email communications at the workplace (Camarena & Fusi 2022). Accordingly, the creation of well-organised email management guidelines is considered a pivotal institutional arrangement for digital correspondence at present (Letmathe & Noll 2024). The other issue connected to email communications, according to Tsvuura and Ngulube (2021), is that the email records that are conveyed through corporate transactions are easily produced and stored as private records in distinct inboxes of personalised email accounts and sometimes taken out by officers when parting with the institution (Tsvuura & Ngulube 2021). This is a very pertinent issue at the council since observations of the files at the council showed no evidence that emails were being printed and filed, nor were they being stored digitally. That raises possibilities that individuals retain most of the email correspondences in their personal email inboxes. Participant 2 indicated that officers would prefer sending important documents to their emails as a means of storage and for easy retrieval. This denotes that sufficient and transparent policy frameworks are needed to offer guidance to officers on procedures for managing digital records, considering where the records should be maintained and assigning responsibilities for their secure encapsulation (Tsvuura & Ngulube 2021). Besides, such practices, as alluded to by Participant 2, imply that the important information kept by officers in their personal email accounts is not easily accessible to others within the organisation unless they liaise with the individual.

Staff awareness, skills, and attitudes concerning access to digital records

The study also revealed a significant deficit in technical competencies, which persists to hamper the accessibility and utilisation of digital records at the council level. Participants 4, 8

and 13 underscored the importance of technical skills in managing digital records and stated as follows, respectively:

The council usually receives new staff now and again, and you find out that not all staff are very conversant with digital skills, and new staff require training and building capacity, and usually that is the challenge that we face.

There is need for digital records management training for some other staff who might not have the skills on digital records management in their career, especially the newly recruited employees.

It is a special skill that someone need to have in order to efficiently work with the system. It ends up being user-friendly if you don't follow the procedures to access, thus why it is very vital using these systems, according to my observation, even if it takes very long to use the system to upload.

Participants constantly stressed that newly employed officers frequently lack training in digital records management, resulting in operational inefficiencies in records access and retrieval. Participant 4 stated that recurrent staff turnover has given rise to a persistent gap in digital competencies among council personnel, while Participant 8 highlighted the urgent need for planned training programmes designed to reinforce institutional capacity, with particular focus on newly appointed staff. Participant 13 buttressed that managing digital systems is a specialised skill, necessitating observance of procedural standards that, if ignored, destabilise usability. These findings align with those of Matlala and Maphoto (2022), who reason that the operational success of digital records systems is contingent on the technical competence of personnel. Similarly, Sat (2025) underlines the importance of digital skills of public servants as a determining factor in facilitating successful access to and administration of digital records.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Zomba District Council case study illustrates how persistent structural and institutional barriers perpetuate the inaccessibility of digital records in municipal institutions functioning under substantial resource constraints. While progress has been noted with respect to digitising some records management functions in accordance with broader e-governance reforms, the council's digital systems are disjointed and incoherently put into operation among departments. The sustained utilisation of informal storage devices and manual archiving practices, in place of a secure digital infrastructure, has played a role in disjointed recordkeeping, recurrent digital records retrieval challenges, and procedural inadequacies. Furthermore, accessibility of digital records persists to be hampered by issues like the absence of policies, inadequate ICT infrastructure, coupled with erratic power supply and limited staff digital skills. These collective challenges hamper the advancement of a consistent, efficient, and fully functioning digital records management system which meets operational and administrative needs but also fails to meet international best practices for digital records management.

Recommendations

- To improve digital records accessibility, the Zomba District Council should implement a multilayered approach. Firstly, the council needs to strengthen the institutional governance framework for records management through the enactment of a broad

records management policy that comprehensively addresses issues of records accessibility.

- Secondly, to tackle the staff digital skills gap, the implementation of a capacity-building programme is pivotal. Such a programme would prepare staff with the required skills to act as accomplished custodians, qualified to efficiently manage and retrieve digital records.
- Thirdly, a modernisation of the existing ICT infrastructure is necessary. This encompasses deliberate investment in consistent internet access, uninterrupted power supplies, and modern digital records storage infrastructure.
- A final recommendation is to implement economically workable approaches to tackle resource constraints. Deploying secure, open-source software offers a sensible solution by affording a scalable platform that allows ongoing improvements and continuous system integration over time.

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