

E-docket system for improved administration and justice delivery in selected Limpopo province police stations

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Abstract

This article analyses the factors considered as potential enablers of and hindrances to an optimal implementation of an e-docket system to improve dockets administration and justice delivery in selected police stations of the Limpopo province, South Africa. In the Criminal Justice System, of which the South African Police Service (SAPS) is an integral part, officials often struggle to conclude criminal cases because poor records management makes it possible for criminal officials to tamper with dockets or steal dockets usually managed manually in police stations. This study adopted a survey research design based on a quantitative research approach, with the use of questionnaires to collect data from police detectives in Limpopo police stations. One hundred questionnaires were distributed to collect data from the target population in six participating police stations, and 65 questionnaires were returned. The study identified some enablers of and significant hindrances to the implementation of the e-docket system called Integrated Case Docket Management System (ICDMS). On the positive side, the e-docket system enabled 24-hour access to and tracking of e-dockets, among others. However, many police officers had limited digital training and skills, which inhibited effectiveness and efficiency of the e-docket system. ICT tools were inadequate, resulting in frequently unavailable and slow network connectivity. These hindrances in Limpopo police stations negatively affected records management and justice delivery. To gain full return on investment in an effective e-docket system, the study recommended that top management support foster an enabling environment that reskills police officers and provides technical support for an optimal operation of an e-docket system for electronic records management.

Keywords: Electronic records management, e-docket system, Limpopo province, administrative justice, police stations

The role of effective records management in the proper functioning of any organisation cannot be overstated. When records management is improved and integrated into the daily management of public institutions such as police stations, it becomes easier to prevent indiscretions obscuring cases of corrupt activities by preventing or reducing the risks commonly accompanying them (De Mingo & Martinez 2018). The arrival of democracy in South Africa necessitated the transformation of public sector organisations, particularly those in the criminal justice system (CJS), to be business-oriented to optimise service delivery (Moonsamy 2018). Seniwoliba, Mahama and Abilla (2017) opine that proper records management system (RMS) is crucial at any institution, as it guarantees survival of such an institution. In the CJS, for many years, dockets have served as critical carriers of evidence in police investigations, where records management brings transparency, which is necessary to stop the occurrence of corruption linked with the administration of information captured by state enterprises, such as misplaced or missing information, unavailability of evidence and altered documents (De Mingo & Martinez 2018). As such, records management should be viewed with similar seriousness often ascribed to other resources that need management (Seniwoliba et al. 2017). On the other hand, poor records management makes it possible for corrupt officers and prosecutors to steal dockets in police stations or sell the evidence in them (Smillie, 2020). In the CJS, officials are sometimes unable to conclude criminal cases due to missing dockets or tampering with evidence contained in the records usually managed manually (Omar 2009). Without proper records management in police stations, particularly the absence of an electronic RMS, accountability is avoided and citizens' rights are undermined, justice is delayed, if not denied, (Motsaathebe & Mnjama 2009; Ngoepe & Makhubela 2015) and records become nothing but mere documents whose purpose will ultimately be rendered defeated.

1.1 Contextual setting to the area of the study

The South African CJS comprises six main parts, namely: The Police Service, the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA), the Judiciary, Correctional Services, the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development and the Department of Social Development (National Prosecuting Authority 2008). For the purposes of this study, attention was on the Police Service (SAPS as officially known) as a key component of the CJS in Limpopo, which is “responsible to prevent, investigate and arrest criminals” (National Prosecuting Authority 2008). There are 103 police stations across the five districts of Limpopo (Limpopo Department of Safety, Security and Liaison 2018), with 16 of those found in the Capricorn district (Statistics South Africa, 2006). The SAPS in Limpopo is classified into 13 clusters; however, this study focused only on the police stations in Lebowakgomo and Mankweng, which respectively comprise Polokwane, Lebowakgomo and Westernburg police stations, and Sekgosese, Botlokwa and Mankweng police stations. At the SAPS, records exist in the form of dockets, which refer to “the document opened by a police official on behalf of affected or interested party, where an allegation of crime has been made against a transgressor” (Moonsamy 2018: 27). The SAPS has since taken a decisive action and adopted the e-docket system called the Integrated Case Docket Management System (ICDMS) to facilitate an integrated method of monitoring police documents, dockets and their storage to prevent theft and sale of dockets and loss of docket information from police stations (Omar 2009). By August 2017, the system had been implemented at 1 153 police stations country-wide and in 509 of the 627 Department of Justice and Constitutional Development courts, including military police stations, which is 80 percent of police stations country-wide (Nothglen News, 2017). Although these police stations use e-dockets, they have not completely discarded the manual system, which is used when records are created in a paper-based format before being scanned into electronic format and is used as

backup for the e-docket system. The created records, either paper-based or electronic, require a proper RMS. This study sought to establish whether the e-docket system was implemented with consideration of all the necessary factors to operate optimally.

1.2 Theoretical framework

The current study was anchored on the e-government readiness assessment model (ERAM) (Al-Omari & Al-Omari 2006), which was developed by Al-Omari and Al-Omari in 2006 and has been applied in African studies by Mtingwi and Van Belle (2012) and Bwalya and Mutula (2014). A theoretical framework brings thoroughness and rigour in research and can link elements of research findings to yield results compatible with a broader outline of other studies (Stewart & Klein, 2016). Furthermore, the theoretical framework informs the researcher and the reader about the context and explanation of the study (Lani 2015). The ERAM model outlines six aspects essential for the implementation of any e-government initiative within the organisation. They are organisational readiness, governance and leadership readiness, customer readiness, competency readiness, technology readiness and legal readiness. In other words, an electronic record management system depends on careful consideration of these key factors. Al-Omari and Al-Omari (2006) postulate that organisational readiness considers business processes and organisational hierarchical structure necessary for e-initiative, leadership and governance readiness consider support and adoption of the e-initiative from different levels of organisational leadership, customer readiness considers accessibility and trust concerns, while competency readiness considers the presence of skilled personnel in the public sector. Technological readiness is concerned with the availability of various technologies to enable the e-government delivery, while legal readiness is about the procedures and regulations to formally regulate government activities formally and legally (Al-Omari & Al-Omari 2006), because to achieve proper records management, there must be compulsory directives and regulations (De Mingo & Martinez 2018). The ERAM helped this study address the objectives by bringing into critical focus governance and leadership, competency and technological readiness as pertinent aspects encapsulated in study objectives (a), (b) and (c).

1.3 Problematising the implementation of the e-docket system

The SAPS, administered by Chapter 11 of Act 108 of 1996, is responsible for upholding and enforcing the law and ensuring offenders are brought to justice (SAPS 2018). However, Limpopo Province Police Stations (LPPS) are often unable to deliver proper community safety because of poor records management, resulting in inconclusive cases due to missing docketts or tampering with evidence (IOL reporter 2020; Smillie 2020). To curb this problem, the SAPS implemented the e-docket system to ensure tampering with the records related to corrupt activities in police investigations becomes almost impossible (Omar 2009). However, e-records management initiatives in public organisations in eastern and southern Africa face numerous challenges (Asogwa 2012; Kamatula 2010; Ambira, Kemoni & Ngulube 2019; Murray 2020), and if adopting the e-docket system by Limpopo police stations was not done with careful consideration of key factors necessary for success, it may follow a similar trail of setbacks and headaches. Unlike physical records, which seem to require minimal skills to manage, e-records creation, preservation, security, access and dissemination issues are new phenomena to most records officers, which result in recordkeeping systems collapsing or becoming dysfunctional and complicated. Suspects are often released due to incomplete police docketts or missing evidence, which hampers the prosecution of perpetrators (news24 2014; African News Agency 2017). Ngoepe and Makhubela (2015) concur that failure to keep records properly contributes to the low conviction rate, as records are not available, are missing or are poorly captured and stored. Consequently, citizens become inclined to not trust, and lose confidence in, the police

and the justice system. Muchaonyerwa and Khayundi (2014) attest that South Africa has the requisite blueprint for electronic records management, but the factors considered when implementing the e-docket system to manage dockets in LPPS are not known or documented. This study sought to fill this knowledge gap.

2. Aim of the study

This study aimed to investigate e-docket system implementation to improve administration and justice delivery in selected LPPS.

3. The objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were to:

- identify factors enabling the implementation of the e-docket system at LPPS
- point out factors hindering the implementation of the e-docket system at LPPS
- establish the significance of the e-docket system in improving police detectives' effectiveness and performance in quality justice service delivery.

4. Literature review

The following is a review of literature pertaining to electronic records management in South Africa and throughout the world. The objectives of the study served as guidelines for the selected content.

4.1 Relevance of e-docket systems in effective records management

Like many other governments around the world, South Africa is coming to terms with issues of administrating and preserving electronic records, having committed itself to e-government to deliver better service to the public (Muchaonyerwa & Khayundi 2014). However, it could be impossible to guarantee effective administration of justice without a strong records management foundation (Maseh & Mutula 2016). Moonsamy (2018: 27) holds that in the CJS, dockets are critical instruments which “affirm the abundance of human right”. For example, between 2013 and 2018, 658 police dockets were reported lost from multiple police detectives' services in South Africa, effectively terminating hopes for justice among victims of multiple carjacking, rape and murder (Ngema 2018; Moonsamy 2018:60; Tshivhase 2020). Missing or incomplete police docket files make it impossible for a judge or magistrate to pass judgement, meaning a delay or denial of justice to the aggrieved or complainant (Ngoepe & Makhubela 2015). Consequently, the e-docket system, which equates to e-justice, is meant to optimise case flow from registration to archiving and “deal with the South African docket issues” (Moonsamy 2018: 23). The e-docket system aims to assist with the administration of criminal cases from when they are opened to when they are closed and to ensure dockets are not lost or tampered with (Murray 2020), because almost all EDRMSs have an audit log to trace each access to the records to ensure the authenticity and reliability of records. Furthermore, Rakemane and Serema (2018) assert that electronic records management gives limitless storage capacity in contrast to paper-based records that takes more space. By extension, records and justice are inseparable, as records constitute an essential ingredient for the administration of justice (Abioye 2014). Maseh and Mutula (2016) conducted a mixed methods research study in the Kenyan judiciary to investigate records management and promote open governance to achieve effective and efficient justice. It was established that the Kenyan judiciary had demonstrated improved records management practices, although several weaknesses, such as inappropriate storage equipment and poorly kept files, were unearthed.

4.2 Enablers of e-docket system implementation

According to Al-Omari and Al-Omari (2006:842), “leadership represents the main factor to maintain and coordinate the body of rules, agreements and standards that set the basis for the success of the system being procured in the organisation”. Management and leadership readiness considers structures in place to ensure the success of the system being procured and unless electronic records are managed well, that is, better than physical paper records, an increased loss of records would arise (Ambira et al. 2019). Thus, top management support is key for the successful implementation of the new system, and in LPPS. Although management made some effort to provide ICT resources to support of e-docket system, more remedial interventions were needed. The technical and ICT support “look at issues such as hardware, software, communication, current technology, legacy systems, sharing applications and data and setting secure infrastructure to exchange services” (Al-Omari & Al-Omari 2006:843). Adequate ICT tools can serve as a platform from which to launch the e-docket system in LPPS. Hence, proper records management requires adequate financial support (Mosweu & Rakemane 2020:110).

As recordkeeping technology changes continuously, professionals in records management need continuous training to remain capable and competent (Marutha 2019). Evolving technologies in electronic records management necessitates staff managing records to undergo continuous in-house and external training to enhance knowledge and skills in areas such as knowledge management, document management and electronic records management (Ntengenyane & Khayundi 2021:18). Wamukoya and Mutula (2005a:74) further detail the competencies and skills required by staff working in an e-records environment as follows: knowledge of e-records management practices and trends, records and information management skills and skills to create, capture, classify, index, store, retrieve, track, appraise, preserve, archive and dispose of records. If outlined policies and infrastructures are not reinforced by qualified and experienced people in records management and the presence of adequate and regular training of employees, the administration of electronic records in organisations will not succeed (Asogwa 2012).

4.3 The significance of the e-docket system on delivery of justice

An e-records management system plays a key role in organisations. Depending on how it is implemented, the system can support or compromise service delivery. According to Ngoepe (2016), records management implemented improperly culminates in poor service delivery because government records are important in a well-functioning administration and a way for citizens to bring governments to account. Therefore, if the implemented computer systems do not facilitate access to reliable and authentic records, they will be a liability rather than an asset to an organisation (Ismail & Jamaludin 2009). In agreement with Ngoepe and Makhubela (2015), if police records are inaccurate, lawyers, prosecutors and magistrates could dispute their authenticity, resulting in serious implications such as withdrawal of cases against offenders. This means reliable and authentic records are needed for the government to administer justice for the victims. Without proper e-records management, suspects are often released due to incomplete and missing dockets (Presence 2014). In the LPPS, electronic records management can enable remote access and sharing of electronic records. For instance, a detective officer and a captain may be able to share and discuss a docket without necessarily being in the same place to deliver effective and speedy justice to citizens. In terms of access, physical paper records can potentially be in only one place at a time, whereas digital records can be accessed and discussed by multiple users at the same time in separate locations for different purposes (Johnston & Bowen 2005).

4.4 Factors hindering the implementation of the e-docket system

While information technologies introduced huge enhancements to organisations, they also produced several complexities and difficulties. Subsequently, they increased the likelihood of data and records losses; vulnerabilities to authenticity and reliability of electronic records; escalating costs of managing records and decentralisation of information, loss of security and privacy; and the need for ICT experts (Asogwa 2012). For example, Ambira et al. (2019) cite lack of budgetary support and top management support as some challenges faced by electronic records management in Kenya. Mosweu and Rakemane (2020:110) cite lack of funds is an impediment facing African countries in managing records throughout their lifecycle because it limits training opportunities for records management staff. In South Africa, a fully-fledged electronic RMS, like the e-docket system, is said to take up to 20 years to be rolled out, as some police stations have not yet received ICT resources (Moonsamy 2018). Likewise, Mutula and Wamukoya (2009) note that African governments generally and the east and southern African region particularly faced complexities in managing records, mainly e-records. Records personnel had inadequate knowledge and skills on issues related to e-records management systems, including metadata identification and procedures for e-records' storage, distribution and disposition (Kamatula & Kemoni 2018:78). There is often the misconception that information technology will easily solve all information and records problems (Kemoni, 2009), without much planning and support. Maseh and Mutula (2016) note below-par infrastructure for storage, absence of an appraisal and disposition programme, inadequate records preservation, lack of a disaster preparedness plan and a vital records management programme, absence of a records management programme, inadequately trained records management personnel and inappropriate top management support as some impediments faced in an attempt to implement appropriate electronic records management.

5. Research methodology

The study was conducted in the police stations of the Lebowakgomo and Mankweng clusters in Limpopo. It adopted the quantitative research approach with a survey research design to investigate electronic records management. The quantitative research approach relies primarily on quantitative data (Johnson & Christensen 2014). The target population for the study was police (detectives) officers selected conveniently from the six participating police stations of the Lebowakgomo and Mankweng clusters due to the project time limits and financial constraints of this study. As such, the non-probability sampling method (convenience sampling) was used. The main objective of convenience sampling is to collect information from participants who are easily accessible to the researcher (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016:2). According to Creedon and Hayes, (2015), Fritz, Taylor and MacKinnon, (2012), Tofighi and MacKinnon (2016), a sample size of 50-100 is good enough to draw valid and reliable conclusions. There were 150 police detectives in the six participating stations. Consequently, 100 police detective officers were sampled conveniently from the six participating stations. One hundred questionnaires were distributed face to face to collect data from the target population in the participating police stations and 65 questionnaires were returned. This way of administering questionnaires ensured a 65% response rate. The questionnaire was organised into four main sections with 24 questions, which were predominantly close ended, with a few supplementary open-ended questions. Both the pre-testing and actual study took place from 2019 to 2020 before the Covid-19 pandemic. Data were analysed using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS V26 for Windows) and descriptive statistics were used to establish frequency distributions and percentages, which were presented in tables.

5.1 Ethical considerations

This study obtained the necessary ethical clearance from the University of Limpopo's Turfloop Research Ethics Committee (TREC/212/2019: PG) and informed consent from all the participants before collecting data. The study ensured that participants' confidentiality and consent were considered.

5.2 Limitations of the study

Due to the highly confidential nature of police work, obtaining a sampling frame listing all police (detective) officers for sampling purposes was difficult, resulting in convenience sampling as the choice for this study, with its inherent limitations. Therefore, the results might not be generalisable to all police stations in Limpopo.

6. Findings and discussion

This section discusses the research findings from data collected through questionnaires in line with study objectives. The respondents had at least matric and were predominantly male, with only 3% of the respondents having less than five years' experience in the police service, as compared to most (97%) who had six and more years' experience.

6.1 Enablers of successful e-docket implementation

Respondents were requested to agree or disagree with the statement that record management systems will not succeed by simply being in an electronic format; hence, there was a need to define the minimum skill sets and competencies necessary for managing electronic records. The study sought to determine whether police officers received electronic records-related training. Table 1 indicates the responses that some (38%) officers did not receive training in how to handle electronic records in LPPS, whereas most 62% police officers did.

Table 1: Training on how to handle electronic records (*N* =65)

RESPONSE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Yes	40	(62%)
No	25	(38%)

The upskilling of records management professionals where most records are captured and administered through computer technologies is essential (Kavishe & Dulle 2016; Chigariro & Khumalo 2018) because training is an important component of modern management (Mosweu & Rakemane 2020) and, as such, an electronic system such as an e-docket system can only be as good as the people using it to implement technology and service delivery improvement in an institution such as the SAPS (National Archives and Records Service of South Africa 2006). Kemoni (2009) notes that proper records management relies on staff responsible for records being educated and trained in records management.

A follow-up question was asked regarding the level of training to those who answered 'Yes' to having received training in how to handle records. Table 2 shows that 42% respondents attended basic training, 8% attended intermediate training and 22% attended advanced training. The fact that 42% of the respondents received basic training suggests that officers had limited training in electronic records management. The issue of inadequate training is not peculiar to LPPS.

Table 2: Level of training received on handling e-records (N =65)

LEVEL OF TRAINING	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Basic training	27	(42%)
Intermediate training	5	(8%)
Advanced training	14	(22%)

Inadequate training means officers attended on-the-job training and workshops that were not extensive enough to transfer the basic skills and expertise of operating the e-docket system; hence, some dockets are still reported lost on the system. For instance, in the Western Cape, 72,7 % of the detectives are on record as not being fully trained to use the (ICDMS) e-docket system (Murray 2020). This indicates low competency readiness of police officers regarding electronic records management in LPPS. Asogwa (2012) underscores that without acceptable and continuous employee training in e-records, electronic records management may not succeed in organisations. Similarly, Ismail and Jamaludin (2009) aver that the users' lack of skill(s) in managing electronic records could result in unconnected or poorly integrated paper and electronic records, duplication and incompatible information systems and standards.

6.2 Significance of e-docket system on delivery of justice

This objective of the study sought to determine the significance of electronic records management implementation on justice delivery in LPPS.

Table 3 shows that 55% of the respondents indicated that the e-docket system took less space than the paper system requiring more space for proper docket storage, whereas 38% indicated that it enabled 24-hour access to the records. Twenty-nine percent indicated it allowed 24-hour tracking of records, 24% indicated it enabled remote access to records, 37% indicated it permitted timeous records sharing, 22% indicated it was cost-effective and 5% refrained from answering the question.

Table 3: Impact of e-records management in LPPS (N =65)

RESPONSE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
It takes less space unlike paper	36	(55%)
It enables 24-hour access to all records	25	(38%)
It allows 24-hour tracking of all records	19	(29%)
Enables remote access to records	17	(24%)
Permits timely sharing of records	24	(37%)
It is cost-effective	14	(22%)

One benefit of e-docket system implementation is it takes less space than a paper-based system, permits timely sharing of records and provides 24-hour access to records. The findings correlated with those of Johnston and Bowen (2005) that an e-records management enables speedy information access to authorised users in multiple locations. Similarly, Rakemane and Serema (2018) assert that electronic records management gives limitless storage capacity compared to paper-based records that takes more space.

6.3 Hindrances to the implementation of e-docket system

This objective was to identify the factors hindering the implementation of the e-docket system in LPPS. The factors were broken down into two categories: those experienced in using the e-docket system and those challenges experienced when transferring paper records to the e-docket system.

Table 4 summarises the respondents' responses to the question to indicate the challenges they experienced when using and transferring paper records into the e-docket system. According to the responses shown in table 4A, slow network was clearly established as the biggest concern facing police officers when using the e-docket system in the LPPS, followed by the loss of records. Respondents were further asked to indicate the challenges they faced when transferring paper records to e-docket system, and table 4B highlights few available computers and unclear records as the most common (26%), among other cited challenges, such as misplaced records (14%), incomplete records (15%), records not well marked (12%) and lack of internet access to the e-docket system (15%).

Table 4: Hindrances faced when using and transferring paper records into e-docket (N =65)

A. Hindrances experienced when using the e-docket system		
RESPONSES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGES
Slow network	50	(77%)
Shortage of computers for supporting system	14	(22%)
Lack of support from top management	29	(45%)
System frequently offline	4	(6%)
System not easy to use	6	(9%)
System frequently crashes	8	(12%)
Loss of records	5	(8%)
Limited storage capacity	1	(2%)
B. Hindrances when transferring paper records into e-docket		
RESPONSES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGES
Misplaced records	9	(14%)
Records not well marked	8	(12%)
Incomplete records	10	(15%)
Records not clear/visible	17	(26%)
No internet to access e-docket	10	(15%)
Only few computers to operate e-docket	17	(26%)
Other (<i>Specify</i>) (3) <i>Power failure, insufficient data typists, only detectives and typists are trained for the e-docket system</i>		

According to Ngoepe (2014), records management processes have traditionally been performed by records management staff; however, changes in digital developments come with new complications to records management, such as the need for ICT experts, vulnerabilities to authenticity and reliability of electronic records and the need for ICT experts. The same sentiment is shared by Asogwa (2012) who argue that as much as ICTs brought huge

advancements to organisations, they also brought several complexities and difficulties. Consequently, they increased the risks of losing data and records.

The network problems underlined that the LPPS are not technologically ready to implement electronic records management to support justice service delivery. Like any other e-records system, ICDMS needs to be subjected to a systematic control from creation, receipt, maintenance, use and disposition (Mutula & Wamukoya 2007), to ensure their maintenance and accessibility. However, these challenges were not peculiar to the LPPS. A review of literature on e-records management in the public and private sectors indicated that organisations faced challenges such as inadequate skills and competencies, low levels of ICT literacy, technological obsolescence and poor funding (Rakemane & Serema 2018). As discussed above, these challenges indicated unclear regulatory framework for records management and missing top management support regarding ICT infrastructure provision in the LPPS such as computers, which implies low legal and leadership readiness of LPPS concerning electronic records management.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

This study aimed to investigate e-docket system implementation in LPPS and established that this was not achieved as envisaged by many hopefuls of effective justice delivery. There were few enablers and significant hindrances to e-docket system implementation in LPPS. There were clues of what electronic records management could bring to the organisation if implemented in the right environment with support from top management. The e-docket system slightly enhanced justice delivery in the LPPS by enabling 24-hour access and tracking of all records, while permitting timeous records sharing. If this study's findings were overlooked or taken for granted, the LPPS is unlikely to reap the full benefits of implementing an e-docket system and it may never realise the return on the investment of the implemented ICDMS.

In view of the finding that a significant number of police officers only had limited training in electronic records management, it is recommended that all police officers receive advanced and continuous training in electronic records management because it is commonly due to unskilled records management and administration that recordkeeping systems collapse or become dysfunctional and complicated (Marutha 2019). With the tendency that records management in sub-Saharan Africa has continuously suffered inadequate top management support and absence of budgetary allocation (Maseh & Mutula, 2016), it is recommended that electronic records management get adequate budgetary and senior management support in order not to suffer the same fate. Since LPPS were found to be ravaged by slow network and unavailable internet access, among other issues, which frustrated police officers in their records management duties, this study further recommends adequate investment in ICT tools as a platform upon which to launch the e-docket system.

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