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# Perceptions of public sector practitioners about records and information management surveys in zimbabwe

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**ABSTRACT:** This article aims at establishing public sector records practitioners‟ perceptions about records and information management surveys which are periodically held by the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ). The urge to carry out the study emanated from the continuing poor records management practices in public sector departments in Zimbabwe despite the fact that NAZ carries out periodic records and information management surveys. This study was carried out in the City of Gweru in Zimbabwe and it employed a survey research design where data were collected using questionnaires and interviews. The study revealed that public records practitioners largely had negative perceptions about NAZ records surveys as they saw the exercise as intrusive and fault-finding. NAZ officers blamed the impasse on lack of knowledge about the importance of records and lack of professional training in records management. The study recommends that NAZ officers should be sleuth and diplomatic when conducting records surveys to promote good relations and as well, there is need for behavior change on the part of public records practitioners for them to develop positive perceptions about NAZ records and information management surveys.

**Keywords**: records surveys; poor records management practices; perceptions of records staff; National Archives of Zimbabwe

## INTRODUCTION

The National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) through its Records and Information Management Section has a mandate to undertake records and information management surveys at every public department once every four years. As observed by Chaterera, (2008 and 2013), Dewah (2010) and Maboreke (2007) these records and information management surveys seem to have little impact in influencing the way public records are managed in Zimbabwe. According to Chaterera (2008) some departments find the records and information management surveys by NAZ as a mere routine requirement to fulfill legislative requirements but without an effect on the way public records are managed. This prompted the researchers to carry out a study on records practitioners‟ perceptions about NAZ records and information management surveys, since their perceptions and attitudes play a pivotal role in the success or failure of the exercise.

As enshrined in its Mission Statement and in Sections 6 and 7 of the NAZ Act (1986), the NAZ inspects and examines records that are created, received, used, maintained and disposed by public sector departments. As well NAZ gives advice on filing, preservation and maintenance of records. When NAZ officers visit public sector departments, they physically inspect records storage facilities and interview registry personnel and management to establish conformity with records management standards, or lack of them. When interviewing registry personnel, the assumption is that records are manned by records-trained personnel, but as Mutsagondo (2012) notes, many times people who manage records in provincial public offices do not hold records management qualifications. As a result, sometimes public records are manned by human resource officers, secretaries, accountants and administrators. The attitude of such personnel towards records surveys, including that of records-trained personnel many times comes under the spotlight, thus making it pertinent to carry out a study of this nature.

### 1.1 Statement of the problem

Despite efforts by the NAZ, that is, to inspect, examine and advise public sector departments about proper and professional management of public records, records practitioners many times detest the exercise (Mutsagondo, 2012). Researchers like Maboreke (2007) in Masvingo Province, Chaterera (2008) in Midlands Province, Manheru (2009) and Mutare (2009) on Chitungwiza Hospital and Tsaura (2011) on Midlands Provincial Education Office observe that records are still poorly managed despite the fact that NAZ had previously conducted records surveys on them. They claim that in some departments, records were kept in cardboard boxes, while in others they were piled on floors in corridors and the basement. This raises eyebrows on the perceptions of public sector records practitioners about NAZ records and information management surveys and thus prompting a research of this nature.

### 1.2 Aim and objectives of the study

The study aims at assessing public sector records practitioners‟ perceptions about NAZ records and information management surveys with special reference to public sector departments in the City of Gweru in Zimbabwe. Particular objectives of the study were:

- To assess perceptions of public sector records practitioners about NAZ records and information management surveys.
- To establish possible causes of such perceptions.
- To examine the impact of public records practitioners‟ perceptions on professional management of records.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Citing Eastwood (1994), Chaterera (2013) defines theoretical framework as a basis from where phenomena can better be studied and understood. This study was informed and influenced by the theoretical frameworks of the records lifecycle and the records continuum concepts. The records lifecycle was developed in the 1930s and it is attributed to Schellenberg of the United States‟ National Archives and Records Administration (Shepherd and Yeo: 2003). Schellenberg analogised the life of a record to that of a biological organism

which is born, lives and dies, as a record is created, used, maintained and disposed (Coetzer: 2012). The gist behind the concept is that current paper records within the public sector should be managed in accordance with the stages and as per advice of NAZ officers during records and information management surveys.

The records continuum concept which Yusof and Chell (2000) see as more applicable to electronic records also influenced the study since electronic records are now produced *en masse* in the public sector in Zimbabwe. The records continuum concept was developed in Canada but adopted in Australia and it is attributed to Upward (Bantin: 2002). The continuum concept holds that there is consistent and coherent management of records from the time they are created through to their preservation and use as archives (Coetzer: 2012). According to Bantin (2002), electronic records are managed through four stages of the continuum namely creation, classification, scheduling and maintenance, but without distinguishing between the duties of a records manager and those of an archivist. This implies that both the records manager and the archivist should be actively involved in the management of records, a feat NAZ carries out through records and information management surveys.

## 2.1 Literature review

The literature review covers definitions of records and information management surveys, NAZ‟s legal basis for conducting surveys as well as how NAZ conducts surveys.

### 2.1.1 Defining records and information management survey

According to the Public Record Office Victoria (1999) a records and information management survey is an exercise which involves gathering comprehensive information about records held by an office. Chaterera (2013) holds that a records and information management survey is an exercise whereby information on how records are created, kept, used and disposed within a public office is gathered with focus on quantity, physical form, type, location, physical condition, storage facilities, use and rate of accumulation. Mutsagondo (2012) holds that a records and information management survey is the process of viewing or examining how records are created, used, stored, retained and disposed within an organisation. Dewah (2010) views records and information management surveys as a marketing tool which links the NAZ and its clients, that is, public offices.

### 2.1.2 NAZ's legal basis for conducting records and information management surveys

NAZ carries out records and information management surveys as they derive such authority from the NAZ Act (1986). According to Sections 6 and 7 of the above Act, the Director of NAZ may request any ministry, local authority or statutory body for access to its premises for the purpose of inspecting and examining its records; giving advice relating to the filing, maintenance and preservation of its records as well as making recommendations with regard to the retention or destruction of its records.

NAZ also derives authority to carry out records and information management surveys on public departments from the Public Service Commission‟s Departmental Integrated Programme Agreement, commonly referred to as DIPA (Mutsagondo:2012). Beginning in 2011, the Government of Zimbabwe adopted a new strategy towards planning where government ministries and departments were given key tasks that they were supposed to

focus on and deliver in set time frame. In accordance with such agreements, the NAZ has among other national assignments the task of holding records and information management surveys in public registries, where each Records Centre in Zimbabwe is expected to conduct at least 33 surveys per year.

### 2.1.3 How NAZ conducts records and information management surveys

Mutsagondo (2012) holds that NAZ staff firstly notifies the head of the department whose records are to be surveyed by means of a letter. Such notification is usually done at least two weeks in advance, so as to make the department prepare as well and thus avoid disrupting their planned day-to-day routine. Nevertheless, Mutsagondo (2012) notes that despite the advance notification, it is common to see public bodies denying Records Centre staff access to their records. This raises questions on what their perceptions of records surveys are. As Penn (1989) notes, surveys are somewhat disruptive and intrusive, making many public officers resist them. Under normal circumstances, the denial is implicit. For example, the head of a public office may simply fail to acknowledge or reply to the Records Centre‟s application for a survey visit.

According to the NAZ Records and Information Management Survey Guidelines (2011), before conducting the survey, NAZ officers firstly address management. Mutsagondo (2012:20) calls this “a courtesy call to management”. In this entrance interview, NAZ officers explain to management the purpose of their visit, the importance or records surveys, quoting the NAZ Act (1986) and dispelling their fears of intrusion and disruption. Thereafter, records staff are interviewed before a physical observation of records, records offices and equipment is undertaken. Mutsagondo (2012) opines that there has to be an exit interview with management, to thank them, re-assure them and briefly give them the synopsis of the records and records management situation in the organisation. Management should also be told that a written report, outlining observations and recommendations would be sent to the department in the shortest time possible.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study made use of the survey research design where data were collected through a questionnaire and a set of interview questions. The survey research design was chosen because it enables one to collect lots of data about characteristics, opinions, attitudes or experiences of the people and as well as allowing one to generalise from a smaller group to a larger group from which the subgroup is selected (Babbie and Mouton, 2001). Ninety-five records practitioners from public sector departments in the City of Gweru comprised the population of the study. From this population, 50 public records practitioners were selected by simple random sampling and were asked to complete questionnaires. Simple random sampling was used because with it, each item in the population has an equal chance of being selected, making the method very authentic and reliable (Westfall, 2008). Five officers of the NAZ were purposively selected and they participated in the study as interviewees. According to Evans (1988), purposive sampling is a sampling method where respondents adjudged to be knowledgeable about the issue at stake are conducted. Collected data were presented in the form of text and on tables. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

### 3.1 Demographic characteristics of informants

Before tackling the research questions, the study looked at the demographic characteristics of informants. These included qualification, work experience and the role they played in undertaking records and information management surveys. Informants‟ background helped the researchers to comprehend informants‟ responses in the light of who they were and what they were. Table 1 below depicts the qualifications of public departments‟ records officers who participated in this study. These were officers from government ministries and departments, local authorities and statutory bodies.

**Table 1: Public records officers' qualifications (N=50)**

| Qualification | Frequency |
|---|---|
| O‟ Level | 6 |
| Records Management Diploma | 25 |
| Records Management Degree | 5 |
| Non-Records Management Diploma | 10 |
| Non-Records Management Degree | 4 |
| **Total** | **50** |

A total of 30 records officers (60%) had qualifications in Records Management, while the rest (40%) had other qualifications, though they worked as records officers. These officers had work experience ranging between 2 and 15 years. Among other duties, they created records, used, maintained and disposed records. Nevertheless, in some departments, notably Statutory Bodies, some records officers doubled as secretaries and administration officers.

Staff of Gweru Records Centre who participated in the study included the Archivist, Records Management Officer, Executive Assistant, Office Orderly and a student attaché. Their demographics and role in conducting records surveys is depicted on Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Demographics of Records Centre staff (N=5)**

| Officer | Education Level | Experience | Role in surveys |
|---|---|---|---|
| Archivist | Degree | 5 years | Active |
| RMA | Diploma | 12 years | Active |
| Executive Assistant | Diploma | 8 years | Passive |
| Office Orderly | Diploma | 4 years | Passive |
| Student attaché | A‟ Level | Less than 1 year | Active |

Of the five officers, 3 played an active role in conducting records and information management surveys. The active role included selecting the public departments to survey, conducting the departments prior to the day of the survey, interviewing management and records officers on the day of the survey as well as writing reports to the department surveyed, outlining observations and recommendations. The Office Orderly and the Executive Assistant played a secondary role in records and information management surveys, which included sending correspondence to departments as well as typing survey reports.

## 4. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

### 4.1 Perceptions of public records practitioners about NAZ records surveys

The histogram below shows the views of public records practitioners about NAZ records surveys.

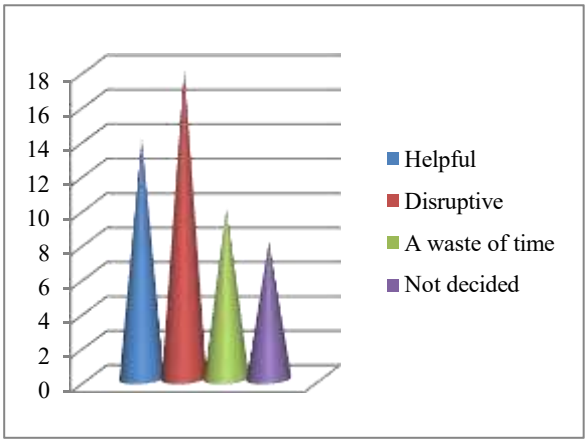



**Fig. 1: Public records practitioners' views about NAZ records surveys**

A total of 28 informants (56%) had negative perceptions about NAZ records and information management surveys. Of them, 18 informants (36%) saw records surveys as disruptive while 10 (20%) saw them as a waste of time. Only 14 informants (28%) held positive perceptions about NAZ records surveys. Eight (16%) were not decided.

Of the 14 public records practitioners (28%) who saw NAZ records surveys as helpful, 2 (4%) indicated they were helpful as they aided them on house-keeping issues, 3 (6%) claimed they helped them on registry procedures and policies, 6 (12%) claimed they aided them on managing records throughout their lifecycle, and 3 (6%) claimed they helped them on preservation and conservation of records. Eighteen informants (36%) who saw records surveys as disruptive were mainly uncomfortable with the frequency at which records surveys were held. They claimed that holding records surveys once every four years was too much. The 10 (20%) who saw records surveys as a waste of time branded them as such because much time and energy were expended on the exercise yet no positive action was taken to address anomalies which were noted during the surveys.

Five NAZ staff commented about the reception they faced when they visited public departments. While 2 (40%) described it as hostile, another 2 (40%) described it as unwelcome and only 1 (20%) described it as good. In their interview responses, 4 NAZ officers (80%) claimed that public departments were not welcoming by their refusal to respond to NAZ requests for surveys, by their failure to acknowledge receipt or sight of the

NAZ survey request letter as well as by the uncalled for referring the NAZ to their head offices in Harare for clearance to conduct the surveys. The hostile reception was also shown by management of public sector departments‟ probing and brain-storming NAZ staff before they could allow them to carry out the exercise. In some instances, the clearance to conduct a survey was reluctantly given with strict pre-conditions being given. This resulted in 4 NAZ officers (80%) claiming that public records practitioners, including management, did not take NAZ records surveys seriously.

Relations between NAZ staff and public records practitioners were fairly bad. This was expressed by 26 public records practitioners. Only 14 saw relations as „Good‟ and 10 as „Very good‟. These statistics were captured on Table 3 below.

**Table 3: Relations between NAZ staff and public records practitioners (N=50)**

| Relations | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Very good | 10 | 20 |
| Good | 14 | 28 |
| Not good | 26 | 52 |
| **Total** | **50** | **100** |

### 4.2 Causes of negative perceptions

Conflicting reasons were given by public records practitioners and NAZ officers as to why bad relations existed between them and NAZ staff. The 26 public records practitioners who saw their relations with NAZ staff as „Not good‟, gave three reasons to explain why such relations prevailed. Of them, 10 (38%) claimed that NAZ officers used abusive language during the records surveys, 12 (46%) accused NAZ officers for using threatening language while 4 (16%) were uncomfortable with NAZ officers‟ rather idealistic ideas. They argued that while NAZ staff had the mandate to advise them during records surveys, they overstepped it by using unprofessional language, which created a rift between the two groups. The 4 officers who claimed NAZ officers held idealistic ideas elaborated that NAZ recommendations were not in line with the economic realities prevailing in the country. This made NAZ officers unpopular for preaching and expecting the best out of them when the reality on the ground was otherwise.

Three NAZ staff (60%) pointed out that negative perceptions exhibited by public records practitioners were a result of lack of knowledge about records management while 2 (40%) claimed it was a result of lack of appreciation of NAZ and the role it played in society.

### 4.3 Signs of bad relations between NAZ staff and public records practitioners

The failure by many public records officers to agree with NAZ officers‟ observations and recommendations signaled the existence of strained relations between the two. The table below shows this more succinctly.

**Table 4: Agreement with NAZ observations and recommendations (N=50)**

| Agreement | Yes | No | Not decided | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| With observations | 20 | 26 | 4 | **50** |
| With recommend-ations | 17 | 29 | 4 | **50** |

A total of 20 informants agreed with NAZ records survey observations while 26 did not agree with them and 4 were undecided. With regard to NAZ records survey recommendations, 17 agreed with them, 29 did not agree with them and 4 were undecided. This showed that disagreements were more on recommendations than on observations. Such perceptions largely impacted negatively on the manner records were supposed to be professionally managed.

The failure to address recommendations made by NAZ staff also signaled that public records practitioners did not take NAZ staff and the records surveys seriously. Figure 2 below shows how public records practitioners addressed recommendations made by NAZ.

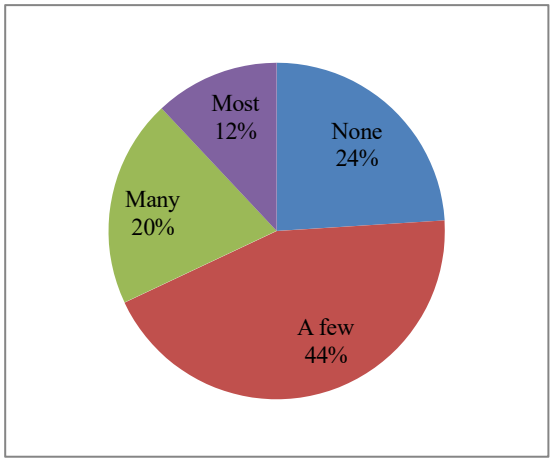



**Fig. 2: Recommendations addressed after NAZ records surveys**

The majority of informants, that is, 22 (44%) indicated that they addressed a few recommendations, while 10 (20 %) addressed many, 6 (12 %) addressed most and disturbingly, 12 informants (24 %) addressed none.

## 5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study revealed that public records officers largely had negative perceptions about NAZ records and information surveys. This was also expressed by Mutsagondo (2012) who gave a number of situations that showed the prevalence of negative perceptions towards NAZ records surveys, namely, management ignoring applications by the NAZ to conduct surveys, management constantly postponing proposed survey dates, management constantly referring NAZ staff to their head office in Harare for clearance, records practitioners remaining cold and exhibiting lack of enthusiasm during the records surveys and lastly, records practitioners failing to implement recommendations made by NAZ officers. Penn et al (1989) hold that such was the case because records practitioners saw records surveys as disruptive and

intrusive while Mutsagondo (2012) claimed that public records practitioners saw them as witch hunts and fault-finding exercises.

Issues of intrusion and disruption were hardly excuses that records practitioners made, given that the NAZ did not make impromptu calls on public departments. As Mutsagondo (2012) argued, dates to hold records surveys were proposed well in advance and under normal circumstances, NAZ officers carefully chose dates that did not coincide with national public holidays or civil service pay-days. Management was also roped into the exercise through the courtesy call and exit interviews where the purpose, importance and recommendations of the records surveys were explained. Penn et al (1988) hold that to limit disruptions to a department‟s day to day work routine, records surveys were supposed to be conducted in the shortest time possible. Under normal circumstances, the archivist revealed in this study that records surveys were unlikely to go beyond four hours. Thus, the claim that a 4-hour records survey which was held once in four years was disruptive lacked truth and substance.

Penn et al (1988) also commented that prying into people‟s private working life, pointed questions, opening drawers and reading papers bred fear, suspicion and general obnoxiousness which made public records staff detest records surveys. Thus, NAZ staff should guard against this if they were to cultivate positive perceptions and attitudes in public records practitioners about NAZ records surveys.

According to NAZ staff, negative perceptions about NAZ records surveys were also a result of lack of training in the field of records management. As noted earlier on, some officers who manned records did not have training in the area. It was therefore very likely that such personnel‟s appreciation of the value of records, records surveys and records management was very minimal. According to Ndenje-Sichalwe (2010), education is necessary for individuals to live meaningfully and to contribute positively to society since education introduce learners to the theory and principles underpinning professional practice in any discipline. In the same vein, Yusof and Chell (1998) opine that education and training are crucial to developing life-long skills and expertise. Thus, without a firm educational background in records and archives management, public records practitioners were more likely to see records surveys as intrusive, disruptive and a waste of time, an unfortunate stance, which as discussed below, worsened the records management practices in public organisations.

According to Mutsagondo (2012), not all records survey outings yield the desired results as records surveys which are conducted under duress produce unimpressive results. Firstly, NAZ officers were likely to do duty for duty‟s sake. Secondly, records management practices in public sector departments were likely to deteriorate further. As Mutare (2009), Manheru (2009), Maboreke (2007) and Chaterera (2013) note, records management practices in public departments were deplorable and in shambles. Thus, if corrective action is not promptly applied, the situation may get worse by the day.

## 6. CONCLUSION

NAZ uses records and information management surveys as tools to assist public sector departments to professionally manage public records. Unfortunately, the study reveal that by and large, public records practitioners have negative perceptions about NAZ records and

information management surveys. Such negative perceptions were largely a result of the alleged intrusion and disruption caused by the exercise, use of unprofessional language by NAZ officers and lack of training in the field of records management by officers managing records in public sector departments. This state of affairs signaled continued poor records management practices in Zimbabwe‟s public sector departments and hence the need for urgent intervention.

## 7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on findings of the research, the study proposes the following:

- Public records practitioners should change their perception about the NAZ records and information management surveys and view the NAZ as a partner rather than a threat in pursuit of good records management practices.
- All public sector records practitioners should be professionally trained and qualified in Records Management, the rationality being that qualified officers are more likely to be appreciative of the importance of records management as well as of NAZ operations.
- NAZ staff should be more professional in conducting records surveys, paying heed to the language they use in their deliberations with public sector records practitioners.

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