Chapter 13
E–Records Management and Freedom of Information for SMEs

INTRODUCTION

While records management in general and e-records management in particular have received serious attention in large enterprises, the same cannot be said for SMEs. This is despite the emergence of an economy where transactions are increasingly carried out electronically, and where the management of e-records emanating thereof must be meticulously managed to obviate disaster. Iron Mount Digital (2007), a leading provider of data backup/recovery and archiving software based in the UK, warns in its findings (based on industry research) that SMEs are reportedly failing to put in place disaster recovery plans in the belief that such recovery plans are the domain of larger companies. Such SMEs could face total shut down or bankruptcy unless they developed contingency plans to ensure that normal operations are resumed follow-

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ing a serious incident. In these plans, SMEs should include a disaster contingency team, assessing key areas of risk across the business, planning for recovery, and reviewing and communicating the plan to employees. It is important for SMEs to continuously backup crucial company information so that in the event of a disaster, the company can be safe in the knowledge that it can restore company data.

Generally, records are strategic and operational assets that are vital to the operation of the state. Like traditional paper-based records, e-records support the day-to-day operation of government services and interactions with citizens and private and public sector partners. As government services move online, e-records become the basis for confirming pensions and other entitlements; registering births and deaths; verifying citizenship; certifying voting rights; enabling the collection of taxes and census enumeration, supporting financial management; enabling audits and evaluations; supporting litigation; and documenting inter-governmental agreements, to name a few (IRMT, 2004). Both paper-based and electronic records are valuable assets that need to be well managed and protected. In addition to providing essential evidence on organisational activities, transactions and decisions, records also support business functions and are critical for the assessment of organisational performance. Without reliable records, governments cannot manage state resources or civil service, or provide services such as education and healthcare effectively. And without effective systems to manage them, governments cannot be held accountable for their decisions and actions, meaning that the rights and entitlements of citizens and corporate bodies cannot be upheld.

The benefits of well managed records in both public and corporate organisations of all sizes include (Kemoni, 2008):

- The ability to mitigate the considerable risks associated with poor records management practices, specifically through accountability, transparency, sound corporate governance and public sector efficiency
- Enabling compliance with statutory requirements
- The ability to provide enterprise-wide access to documents, records and information resources contained within multiple databases
- The ability to use electronic documents and records as inviolate and credible evidence
- Instilling knowledge of fundamental records management practices and how they relate to FOI (Freedom of Information) and information and privacy principles
- Increasing productivity and individual accountability.

Well managed records contribute to the smooth operation of an organisation’s programmes by delivering services in a consistent and equitable manner. Through proper management, accurate, timely, relevant and credible information can be made available to
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