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**The Role of the Jamaica Archives & Records Department
Network in the National Information System**

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The Role of the Jamaica Archives & Records Department Network in the National Information System

Introduction

In 1977 when the Plan for a National Documentation, Information and Library System for Jamaica was produced by the National Council on Libraries, Archives & Documentation Services, the Jamaica Archives as it was then known, was identified as one of the nine (9) networks of the National Information System (NIS). By the time of the Second Plan for a National Documentation, Information and Library System for Jamaica, produced ten years later, the Archives, now the Jamaica Archives & Records Department or JARD for short, was one of the five (5) major focal points of the System.

The JARD plays a highly specialized role in the NIS, for whereas the other main networks are libraries with most of their holdings consisting of published materials, the JARD consists of government records and other papers – unpublished for the most part. Most of this information is not available anywhere else and is therefore unique. The holdings of the Archives therefore complements those in libraries as the institution provides information of a different kind – but still essential for the nation’s growth and development.

Therefore I think it would be generally agreed that the type of information the Archives contains would qualify the institution to serve as an important component of an integrated national information system. The Archives is not only a storehouse of the nation’s memory, but makes the information contained in these records available to researchers and others who are exploring the past in order to better understand the present as well as to chart a path for the future.

One of the objectives of the NIS is to ensure that there is speedy access to information contained in the various components of the System. The Archives is at present building a computerized data base of its holdings which in time would be available on the Internet. There is a link to the Archives website from the National Information System page on the National Library of Jamaica’s web site. By accessing the NLJ site therefore, one should be able to access lists of the holdings of the components of the System.

The G-RIM Network

There has been a major development regarding networking in the field of archives and records management since 1986 when the Information and Library Plan was revised. This occurred in 1997 when the Government Records and Information Managers Network known as G-RIM was established as a result of an initiative by the Archives. As its name suggests, it is a network of records and information managers in the public sector and it was established to help the Archives carry out its mandate to promote the value and importance of records management in the public sector. Meetings of the Network are chaired by the Government Archivist and the staff of the Government Records Centre provides the necessary secretarial services.

This establishment of this network has its origins in the Government's decision to introduce a freedom of information law. This automatically meant that special attention had to be paid to records management. In 1995 the Government had appointed a committee (the Wells Committee) to consider the components of a freedom of information legislation. When the decision was taken to proceed with the legislation, the Jamaica Archives in Ministry Paper # 43 of November 1998 Proposals for Access to Information Act was given responsibility to guide ministries and departments in preparing for the Act. This was because the Government recognized that the effectiveness of the legislation depended on the availability and accessibility of records.

The position of Information Manager began to be created in ministries, training and sensitization sessions were held, record inventories were started and other preparations began to take place. The objective was to ensure that record management programmes in government entities were ready to comply with the provisions of the ATI Act when it came into effect. As more records managers were appointed it was decided that it would be a good idea to form a network to share experiences and ideas.

The main objectives of the G-RIM Network are to develop strategies for:

- Improving efficiency and productivity by maintaining effective active and inactive file management systems
 - Applying appropriate controls for each of the 5 major stages of the records life cycle.
 - Reducing operating costs by developing and implementing records retention schedules.
 - Assimilating new records management techniques through information technology.
 - Ensuring regulatory compliance by operating an efficient and effective records and information management programme, working in tandem with the organization's legal department.
 - Safeguarding vital records by maintaining their confidentiality and integrity, and establishing disaster prevention and recovery programmes.
 - Preserving corporate and national memory through proper disposition of historical records to the Jamaica Archives.
 - Ensuring that records management programmes in entities are ready to comply with the provisions of the Access to Information Act.
 - Maintaining relationships with other information management bodies.
 - Articulating the improvement of all aspects of records and information management.

From a small beginning of 4 or 5 members the Network has over 80 names on the mailing list. The average attendance at meeting is usually between 30 and 40 persons.

When the emphasis was on getting entities ready for the ATI legislation the network used to meet almost every month as the meetings were very effective in sharing information and discussing challenges being experienced. Now meetings tend to be held every two or three months.

The membership in G-RIM is open to all Records Managers, or officers in charge of records, in any public sector institution in both central and local governments. The core of the membership consists of the Directors of Information in ministries and the large departments, statutory bodies and executive agencies. On the JARD website there is a G-RIM section which contains a discussion Forum and this can only be accessed by members. On the Forum are posted minutes of meetings, papers for discussion and any other relevant material. Members are encouraged to access these materials and to post their comments and questions.

The G-RIM Network is fully integrated into the National Information System as its membership cuts across all other networks, particularly the sectoral networks of the National Library of Jamaica System. For example, the Planning Institute of Jamaica (PIOJ), which is the focal point of the SECIN Network and the Ministry of Agriculture which is the focal point of the Jamaica Agricultural Documentation and Information Network (JADIN) are members. The Jamaica Library Service which forms its own network in the National Information System is also a member of the G-RIM network.

In all government ministries and in some statutory bodies, records management, registry and library operations are all combined into one unit. The head of that Unit is the Director of Information, Documentation and Access Services. Most of these Directors are librarians – and there are many of them at this Seminar –. At the last count a few months ago, only in four (4) ministries was the Director not a librarian and one ministry has since appointed a Director who is a librarian. Since these officers are in overall charge of their Units – and dealing with access to information matters is a major and time consuming responsibility - many ministries have a librarian who reports to the Director and is directly responsible for the library.

This integrated approach to the management of information resources within a government entity came about because of representations made by the Archives Advisory Committee as far back as 1991. The Committee had recommended the creation of a division in each ministry which would link the traditional registry, library and information technology sections. It also recommended the appointment of Information Resource Managers in ministries as part of a career path for records management personnel. The Government did not accept the entire recommendation as information technology was not included but it accepted the idea of combining registry and library operations (for those ministries which had libraries) into one unit.

So a convergence of librarianship and records management developed. The concept of convergence between the two professions is not new but in recent years it has accelerated. This is due to a number of factors such as:

- Changing communications technologies
- Growing importance of records management

- Similar issues in use & preservation of library & archival materials as society is being transformed by the rise of digital technologies
- Increased recognition that Information is a resource independent of the physical form in which it occurs

New Developments

G-RIM meetings used to be an important forum to discuss matters relating to Access to Information. However since the formation of the ATI Association of Administrators (ATIAA) chaired by Ms Helen Rumbolt we do not go into ATI matters at our meetings as these are discussed at meetings of ATIAA. Instead, the G-RIM Network focuses on areas of direct concern to records management. One of the most important of these areas is the management of electronic records.

To this end, G-RIM joined with the Central Information Technology Office, (CITO), an agency of the Ministry of Mining and Telecommunications in establishing a joint committee to work out standards and guidelines for government institutions for the management of electronic records using electronic records management systems (ERMS). The project would include the following components:

1. Procedures to be followed in obtaining an ERMS
2. Functional requirements expected of a system
3. Template procedures and process workflows for re-engineered common and widely used business processes
4. Recommended ERMS products along with pricing and procurement guidelines
5. Implementation guidelines and training guidelines for deployment of ERMS

To date the first phase, the definition of functional requirements for the ERMS application and a template for re-engineered process workflows has been completed and has been sent to the Cabinet Secretary for consideration.

The other phases would be the

1. Tendering and selection of suitable software product(s) for Government
2. Implementation on a structured pilot basis for a selected Ministries and/or Office
3. Assessment of the pilot
4. Full rollout in all government ministries

For an electronic records management system to be effective, records need to be properly classified. The classification of records is a major challenge in many government institutions as there is no standardized system of classifying files and other documents. Every entity virtually creates its own system. Since every entity is different it would be difficult to introduce a standardized system, especially for their operational files. However every entity carries out basic administrative functions relating to the management of staff and office facilities and services. Records generated by these activities are common across government. As a result the decision was taken to work on a general classification scheme for these records.

We therefore decided to make recommendations regarding the classification system to be used for these common categories. We began with the Human Resources (HR) Series and we produced a draft classification schedule covering all categories of HR functions. This was sent to the Corporate Management Division of the Cabinet Office for their consideration. They sent it to a committee of HR Managers and we are to meet to discuss the schedules with them.

Our next project is to look at the general Administration series and we are having a meeting next Thursday morning to begin our deliberations on this. We have placed a draft schedule on our Forum.

Conclusion

The G-RIM Network plays important and unique role in the National Information System as it brings together on a voluntary basis record managers in government who have in their custody the records (paper and electronic) produced by government on a daily basis. These materials constitute a valuable source of information and are essential to the entire governmental process as well as to the memory of the nation. Some of the records produced today will become the archives of the future.

The G-RIM Network will continue to serve as a force for improving efficiencies in the overall management of government information and to promote the importance of records management. This is being done in order to show that efficient records management practices are indispensable to transparency, accountability and good governance.

Thank You