TRACING THE MOTIVATION FOR USE OF EMAIL RECORDS IN ZIMBABWE’S CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

Dr. Samson Mutsagondo

Lecturer: Digital, Archival and Historical Information Management programme
Department of History, Heritage and Knowledge Systems
University of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe
Email: smutsagondo@arts.uz.ac.zw

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:
Received: Sep 30, 2021
Revised: Nov 18, 2021
Accepted: Dec 21, 2021
Available Online: Jan 5, 2022

Keywords:
Electronic records management; Email; Email management; Email records; Email records management

JEL Classification:
D8; D80; D83

ABSTRACT

There is increased use of electronic mail (email) as official records in many organizations. In fact, email is no longer used for communication purposes only, but it is also as an official record in business transactions. Zimbabwe’s central government is one such institution where reliance on use of email is on the increase. This article identifies and discusses factors that motivate Zimbabwe’s central government in using email as an official record in day-to-day business. The study was mixed method research and it made use of the convergent mixed methods research design. A total of 240 out of 660 informants from 12 out of 22 government ministries participated in the study where they responded to structured questionnaires. Ten interviewees also participated in the study. These included seven archivists from the National Archives of Zimbabwe, the director of the National Archives of Zimbabwe, an administration director from one government ministry and an Information Technology director from another government ministry. In addition to structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, data were also collected through personal observation and document reviews. Revelations from the study were that rise in use of email records was boosted by strides in electronic government and mobile government as well as issues of low cost, speed and ease of use of email, the later factors owing much to the innovation diffusion theory which greatly informed this study. The study recommended that increase in use of email records should match proper management of email records in order to make email an authentic, reliable and useful record of integrity.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is currently a transition from use of paper records to electronic records in both developed and developing countries in the world (Pignata, Lushington, Sloan and Buchanan, 2015; Carpenter, Jackson, Matthews, Thomas and Spencer, 2012). Electronic mail (email) is one type of electronic records (Nengomasha, 2009) alongside other electronic records like spreadsheets, databases, Internet content, word-processed documents and digital recorded messages. Email refers to mail sent or received electronically (Nengomasha, 2009) or to the electronic version of paper mail (Nightingale, Song, Michelson and Field 2012). McMurtry (2014) defines it as documents that are created and received through computer-mediated communication. In the context of this article, records communicated through the email media are regarded as email records.
records. Thus, records like correspondences, minutes of meetings, staff records and policies which are communicated through the email media are email records.

Increase in use of email as business records has been widely recorded on the international scene. This has been done, for example, by Dilanian (2016) and Kavanaugh (2016) in the United States of America; Lips, Rapson and Hooper (2008) in New Zealand; Pignata, Lushington, Sloan and Buchanan (2015) in Australia; Carpenter, Jackson, Matthews, Thomas and Spencer (2012) in the United Kingdom and Seow, Chennupati and Foo (2005) in Singapore. All the cases have shown that email has become the commonest and most popular electronic record. Regionally, in Southern and Central Africa, increase in use of email has been recorded by Keakopa (2007; 2009) in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa; Nengomasha (2012) in Namibia; Rakemane and Serema (2018) in Botswana and Sejane (2004) in Lesotho. In Zimbabwe, where this study is set, a number of researchers have revealed that official use of email as records is rising steadily, prompting research into this sudden change of behaviour. This has been revealed by Chihambakwe, Wutete and Sigauke (2017); Mutsagondo (2021); Mutsagondo and Tsvuura (2017) and Sigauke, Nengomasha and Chabikwa (2016) in their studies which focused on a commercial private bank in Zimbabwe, government ministries in Zimbabwe; public departments in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe and state universities in Zimbabwe, respectively.

Increase in use of email in Zimbabwe should not be misconstrued as implying that email or electronic records have overtaken paper records in terms of prevalence of use. Matangira (2016) holds that paper is the still the dominant records format in Zimbabwe. Likewise, Bhebhe (2015) holds that Zimbabwe still relies heavily on paper records but hastens to state that use of electronic records is on the rise following the computerisation of many government ministries and departments. Other scholars such as Jumira (2011) as well as Nkala, Ngulube and Mangena (2012) attribute to the increase in use of records in electronic form to the electronic government programme which was introduced in Zimbabwe in 2011.

This study focused on increase in use of email records in Zimbabwe’s central government, a tier of government under which government ministries and departments fall. The other tiers of government are local authorities and subsidiary bodies (Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013). Focus was made on the head offices of government ministries which are based in Harare, the capital city of the country. Currently, Zimbabwe’s central government comprises of 22 government ministries.

1.1 Research problem

Many institutions now generate, receive and use email records as official business records. Amongst them are government ministries (Mutsagondo, 2021), government departments (Mutsagondo and Tsvuura, 2017), banks (Chihambakwe, Wutete and Sigauke, 2017) and universities (Sigauke, Nengomasha and Chabikwa, 2016). Scholars like Cloy (2007), Kavanaugh (2016:4) as well as Seow, Chennupati and Foo (2005) hold that there has been a remarkable increase in use of email records, but which did not match with efforts at properly and professionally managing the same. The sudden transition from a solely paper-based records regime to a hybrid of paper and electronic records, where email records feature prominently, calls for research into
reasons motivating such a shift in light of developments in the records and information management fraternity.

1.2 Objectives of the study

The study addresses two objectives namely;

(i) To identify factors that motivated rise in use of email records in Zimbabwe’s central government.
(ii) To assess how the identified factors aided the rise in use of email as authentic records in Zimbabwe’s central government.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

This study made use of the theoretical framework of the Innovation Diffusion Theory, a theory which was introduced by Everett Rogers in 1962. The theory holds that new ideas spread and get adopted by society due to the presence of any or all the five constructs, namely, complexity, compatibility, observability, trial-ability and relative advantage (Dearing and Cox, 2018). Technology which is not complex, meaning to say, technology which is simple to understand and use is easily adopted by society. Similarly, technology which is compatible and consistent with existing values, past experiences and needs of potential adapters is easily adopted. At the same time, results of the new technology should be observable, meaning to say, they should be easily seen by society for the technology to be tried. The ability of the technology to be tried is what Ali (2016) refers to as ‘trial-ability’. Lastly, the technology should have advantages relative to those of existing technology in matters like economic edge, social prestige, comfort, convenience and satisfaction (Dibra, 2015). What all this imply is that email has come to be widely adopted and used because it has in it constructs of the Innovation Diffusion Theory which make it attractive for adoption than other and/ or existing technology.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study made use of the mixed methods research approach and a convergent mixed methods research design. A total of 240 out of 660 Records Officers (ROs), Administration Officers (AOs) and Information Technology Officers (ITOs) from 12 out of 22 government ministries participated in the study by responding to structured questionnaires. In addition, seven Archivists and the Director (D1) of the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ), one Administration Director (D2) and one Information Technology Director (D3) from central government participated as interviewees. In addition to structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, data were collected through personal observation and document reviews.
4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study sought to address two objectives, that is, to identify reasons that motivated the rise in use of email records in Zimbabwe’s central government as well as to assess the impact of the motivational factors in light of ongoing developments in the records and information management field. After identification and analysis, a discussion of the motivational factors is handled.

4.1 E-government as promoting rise in use of email records in Zimbabwe’s central government

There was consensus amongst all three categories of questionnaire respondents that e-government was instrumental in the rise in use of email records in Zimbabwe’s central government. Figure 1 below shows the responses of ROs, AOs and ITOs.

![Bar Graph]

**Fig. 1: E-government promotes rise in use of email records in Zimbabwe’s central government**

A total of 62 (77.5%) ROs, 50 (62.5%) AOs and 60 (75%) ITOs agreed that e-government boosted the rise in use of email records in Zimbabwe’s central government. Only a paltry eight (10%) ROs, 17 (21%) AOs and 15 (19%) ITOs did not see the role of e-government as important. Ten (13%) ROs, 13 (16%) AOs and 5 (6%) ITOs were not aware whether or not e-government boosted the rise in use of email within their ministries.
Since the convergent mixed methods research design was used, informants were also interviewed to establish the role played by e-government in promoting the rise in use of email records in Zimbabwe’s central government. The responses of five of the seven NAZ archivists are shown in Figure 2 below.

![Diagram showing reasons why e-government boosted rise in use of email records]

**Fig. 2: Interviewees’ reasons why e-government boosted rise in use of email records**

The five informants regarded issues of ICT skills, Internet Service Providers and ICT infrastructure (computers, servers and the Internet) as part of e-government which promoted the rise in use of email in Zimbabwe’s central government. D3, an IT Director from one central government ministry, stated that e-government promoted the rise in use of email in central government since it was instrumental in advocating for the establishment of the ICT ministry in 2009, the crafting of ICT policies and the massive procurement of ICT infrastructure by central government.
Personal observation was also used in collecting data in this study. The researcher was given access into offices in 10 out of 22 ministries. He discovered that there were loads of ICT infrastructure, mostly desk-top computers, lap tops, facsimiles and servers, which directly and indirectly had a bearing in the generation of email records. NAZ6, a Senior Archivist, also backed the researcher’s observation as he remarked:

*Computers, which during the olden days were considered complicated and valuable gadgets, have now become just ordinary items. It would rather be absurd to see one single office without a computer. In addition, many officers have personal lap tops which they bring to work every day and use for both personal and official business. This has made it possible for officers to easily receive and send email.*

MICIT (2016) opines that Zimbabwe has witnessed a rise in the number of Internet Service Providers, increase in Internet bandwidth, increase in mobile Internet subscriptions and the introduction of the first national ICT policy in 2007 and the second one in 2016, factors that promoted rise in use of record in networked environments. The country has mobilised the G2B, G2C, G2G and G2E dimensions, where email has been used as an ICT application. Fixed ICT infrastructure that boosted e-government and subsequently email were desk top computers, servers and fixed telephone network. As Government of Zimbabwe expands the e-government programme, increase in use of ICTs including email also increase. On a regional level, scholars like Okae and Gyasi (2013) and Sethunya (2015) as well as Desai, Hart and Richards (2015) on a global level have observed that use of email is motivated by many factors, amongst them being the rise of e-government as there is improved ICT infrastructure procurement, development and mobilisation as well as development of ICT skills.

### 4.2 M-government as promoting rise in use of email records in Zimbabwe’s central government

Use of mobile technologies such as laptops, cell phones and tablets were also indicated as instrumental in promoting rise in use of email records in Zimbabwe’s central government. This applied mostly in cases where central government interacted with clients and stakeholders in rural and remote areas where ICT fixed infrastructure was scarce. Figure 3 shows respondents’ views about the role played by m-government in enhancing the rise in use of email records in Zimbabwe’s central government.
Fig. 3: M-government promotes rise in use of email in Zimbabwe’s central government

A total of 65 (81.3%) ITOs agreed that m-government boosted the use of email in their ministries. Only 30 (37.5%) ROs and 33 (41.3%) AOs saw the role of m-government as important. A total of 45 (56.3%) ROs, 42 (52.3%) AOs and 10 (12.5%) ITOs dismissed the role of m-government as a factor in enhancing the rise in use of email. Five (6.3%) respondents in each category expressed that they had no idea whether or not m-government was important in the rise in use of email records. It is the contention of this study that ITOs are better placed to realise the role played by m-government than the other two categories of officers because issues of m-government and mobile technologies are part of their day-to-day work.

All NAZ archivists who were interviewed indicated that the role of m-government was rather marginal as compared to that of e-government in enhancing rise in use of email. The major reason for the disparity was that most mobile devices were personally-owned by officers and were thus less frequently used in official government business. NAZ3, a Principal Archivist, had this to say;

Save for laptops, most mobile technologies are normally not used for official business since they are personal gadgets. Amongst these technologies are cell phones, tablets and smart phones. In addition, the availability of fixed technologies like desk top computers make officers forget about other ICTs like mobile technologies that can be alternatively used. As a result, the role played by mobile devices in enhancing official use of email is rather minimal.

Another Principal Archivist, NAZ1 also commented;

Most government workers are used to fixed technologies that are provided by their employers. Use of mobile technologies is largely unofficial and as such, are normally used
for personal business on platforms like Whatsapp and Facebook. Thus, it is not surprising that the role of m-government is largely not highly regarded by many public officials.

Nonetheless, ITOs saw the role played by m-government as important as shown by the role played by the following mobile technologies;

(a) Cellular phones, which were indicated by 25 (31.3%) ITOs.
(b) Smart phones, which were indicated by 28 (35%) ITOs.
(c) Laptops, which were indicated by 68 (85%) ITOs.

Okae and Gyasi (2013) aver that Africa has witnessed a steady rise in use of cellular phones as by 2013, Africa had over 600 million mobile phones. This has greatly capacitated many people to go online, including using email for communication and record purposes.

4.3 Role of the regulatory framework in promoting the rise in use of email

The regulatory framework was also identified as a factor that fairly enhanced the rise in use of email in Zimbabwe’s central government. The main regulatory framework in Zimbabwe is the NAZ Act (1986). Respondents were asked whether or not the NAZ Act (1986) helped to promote the rise of email records in Zimbabwe’s central government. Table 1 below shows their responses.

Table 1: NAZ Act (1986) promotes use of email in central government

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>I do not know</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ROs</td>
<td>25(10.42%)</td>
<td>46(19.17%)</td>
<td>9(3.75%)</td>
<td>80 (33.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AOś</td>
<td>33(13.75%)</td>
<td>42(17.5%)</td>
<td>5(2.08%)</td>
<td>80 (33.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITOś</td>
<td>22(9.17%)</td>
<td>53(22.08%)</td>
<td>5(2.08%)</td>
<td>80 (33.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>80(33.34%)</td>
<td>141(58.75%)</td>
<td>19(7.92%)</td>
<td>240(100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the majority of respondents (141; 58.75%), the NAZ Act (1986) did not play a very significant role in enhancing the rise in use of email in Zimbabwe’s central government. Only 80 (33.34%) stated that the NAZ Act played an important role in enhancing use of email in central government, while 19(7.92%) could not say whether or not the Act played an important role. Interviewees, namely, NAZ archivists and D1 were also asked to assess the role played by the NAZ Act (1986). Most archivists (5; 71.4%) stated that the NAZ Act was less helpful in promoting the rise of email records. Their individual responses are shown in Figure 4 below.
The remaining two archivists, that is, NAZ3 and NAZ6, were rather optimistic about the role played by the regulatory framework in promoting the rise in use of email records in Zimbabwe. They stated that the NAZ Act (1986) can be used to manage records in all formats, inclusive of paper, electronic and audio-visual records. They therefore stated that the NAZ Act (1986) enhanced the rise of email records in central government simply because the Act covered records in “all formats”. D1, the NAZ Director, confirmed that the NAZ Act (1986) was skewed more in favour of paper records than electronic records and thus he felt there was need for a review of the archival law to make it fully cater for electronic records as well.

The issue of the NAZ Act (1986) being skewed more in favour of paper records than electronic records has also been raised in other studies, for example, by Huni and Dewah (2019) as well as Mutsagondo and Chaterera (2016) where both studies called for the revision of the NAZ Act (1986) in order to holistically accommodate the management of electronic records, including email. Studies by Marutha (2011) in Limpopo province of South Africa and Kalusopa (2011) in

Fig. 4: NAZ archivists’ views as to why the NAZ Act (1986) did not enhance rise in use of email records in central government
Botswana revealed that national archival laws of the respective countries were largely unknown and unused by action officers in managing electronic records. For them, such national archival laws were less helpful in promoting professional and proper use of electronic records.

4.4 Role of the policy framework in promoting the rise in use of email

Policies are there to guide action. Respondents and participants were asked whether their ministries had email policies and if they had, how the email policies enhanced the rise in use of email records in central government. Table 2 below shows respondents’ views about the availability of email policies in their ministries.

Table 2: Existence of email policies in central government

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of officers</th>
<th>Email policy exists</th>
<th>Email policy does not exist</th>
<th>No idea</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ROs</td>
<td>14(5.83%)</td>
<td>62(25.83%)</td>
<td>4(1.67%)</td>
<td>80(33.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AOs</td>
<td>18(7.5%)</td>
<td>54(22.5%)</td>
<td>8(3.33%)</td>
<td>80(33.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITOs</td>
<td>32(13.3%)</td>
<td>42(17.5%)</td>
<td>6(2.5%)</td>
<td>80(33.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>64(26.67%)</td>
<td>158(65.83%)</td>
<td>18(7.5%)</td>
<td>240(100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Very few respondents (64; 26.67%) indicated that their ministries had email policies while 158 (65.83%) stated that their ministries did not have email policies. Four (57.1%) NAZ interviewees also stated that most government ministries did not have email policies, thus confirming the views raised by questionnaire respondents. Also confirming non-availability of email policies was D3. He stated that the official position was that all ministries were supposed to have email policies, but lapses in follow-ups by Permanent Secretaries (heads of ministries in central government) resulted in IT departments dragging their feet in helping to craft these policies. D1 also confirmed that not all ministries had email policies and that those with the policies had crafted them on their own without assistance from the NAZ which is the norm. D1 also indicated that the absence of NAZ-crafted email policies was a result of NAZ being overwhelmed with work, but hastened to state that with the draft records policy currently being polished up, every public sector organisation will soon have a NAZ-crafted email policy.

It should be noted that the existence of records management policies is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for a proper management of records. Examples from the local and international scene help to support this assertion. A local study by Charewa (2020) in Zimbabwe on the management of pension records at the National Social Security Authority revealed that one of the greatest impediments to management of pension records was the absence of a records management policy. Elsewhere, in Kenya, Maseh (2016) noted that the absence of records policy was a big blow to proper management of records. Rakemane and Serema (2018) made a similar observation in Botswana and so did Mutsagondo (2017) in Zimbabwe. Nonetheless, a few African countries have national records management policies.
4.5 Generic advantages of email over other ICTS

Respondents and informants also indicated that generic advantages of email, for example, speed of transmission, low cost, audit trail mechanism and ease of use, also greatly contributed to the rise in use of email and subsequently the adoption of use of email records in central government. Figure 5 shows the views of respondents regarding the adoption of use of email in Zimbabwe’s central government.

A total of 45 (56%) ROs, 55 (69%) AOs and 55 (69%) ITOs indicated that email was widely adopted because it was easy to use. People normally adopt use of new technology if it was easy to use. Since the study was mixed methods, interviewees were also asked why there was a sudden rise in use of email and subsequently adoption of use of email records on Zimbabwe’s central government. The majority (6; 85.7%) of archivists also saw ease of use as an important factor which enhanced use of email in central government. One of them, NAZ4, indicated that Zimbabwe’s central government was experiencing diffusion of email since it was simple to use or apply and as well since it was compatible with public service norms and ideals. In one records survey report in Ministry J, the records and information supervisor indicated that her ministry had adopted use of email in official business because the technology was easy to use. However, she hastened to state that while the technology was easy to use, it was very difficult to manage.

Desai, Hart and Richards (2015) hold that email is easy to use that it can be used from a variety of devices like computers and smart phones. Dearing and Cox (2018) define complexity as the absence of complications on new technology, a factor that encourages people to try the new
technology. The argument advanced by proponents of the innovation diffusion theory is that the simpler it is to understand and use new technology, the quicker it is adopted.

The issue of ease of use can also be shown by the fact that email can be accessed using a variety of gadgets. This was indicated by 18 (28%) ROs, 35 (44%) AOs and 50 (63%) ITOs. Email can be received and sent via gadgets like desk top computers, lap tops, tablets and smart phones. D2, an Administration Director in central government supported the fact that use of different ICTs was an advantage that central government enjoyed and come to take advantage of. Personal observation by the researcher in 10 ministries where access was given revealed that government ministries indeed had connected desk top computers and lap tops as well as cellular and smart phones which were used for official business. The relative advantage construct of the Innovation Diffusion Theory states that technology that has many advantages, for example, economic, social prestige, comfort, convenience and satisfaction advantages relative to existing technology, is easily and quickly adopted.

The issue of speed of transmission was seen by a sizeable number of respondents as an important factor. A total of 62 (78%) ITOs, 58 (73%) AOs and 42 (53%) ROs saw speed as a factor that motivated central government in using email ahead of other ICTs. D3, the ICT Director supported this stance as he argued that “in business time is money” and as such speed of transacting in business gave email an edge over other alternative ICTs.

Cost as a motivation factor was indicated by 70 (88%) AOs as compared to 58 (73%) ITOs and 40 (50%) ROs. The issue of cost was also supported by NAZ archivists. One of them, NAZ5, stated that the Government of Zimbabwe always emphasised on use and adoption of cost cutting measures in business. He remarked;

For the GoZ, cost is a major factor. The government has adopted cheaper but efficient ways of doing business. This has resulted in the adoption and use of cheaper ICTs like email as opposed to the continued use of traditional means of information and communication.

Regarding the issue of low cost, Ramsay and Renaud (2012) state that email is relatively cheaper than traditional phone calls and letters and thus the reason for its widespread use. The issue of low cost has also been raised by Chihambakwe, Wutete and Sigauke (2017) who hold that relatively, email outperforms telephone, face to face, facsimile and letters as a mode of communication in terms of cost and convenience. Vdovin (2020:2) metaphorically describes email as a “free tool” since the costs are reasonably very low.

Central government was also motivated to use email because it has an audit trail mechanism. This was indicated by AOs where 30 (38%), 45 (56%) ROs and 60 (75%) ITOs. All NAZ archivists saw the audit trail mechanism as an added advantage that email had over other ICTs. NAZ7 indicated that this facility made email a record of integrity as authenticity of email
was thus enhanced. For scholars like Ramsay and Renaud (2012) audit trail promotes evidential value, which in turn enhances authenticity of email as official records.

5.1 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Email has become a de facto official record in Zimbabwe’s central government. Many factors have made it a record medium of choice and amongst them are issues of e-government, m-government, strides in regulatory and policy frameworks, procurement of ICT infrastructure and skills and capacity development on the one hand and the generic advantages of email on the other. Issues of speed, low cost and ease of use, factors supported by the Innovation Diffusion Theory, play an important part here. While it is prudent to use and uphold the use of email as official records, it is also important for the Government of Zimbabwe to improve the manner it manages email. Use on its own without proper management is detrimental to gains made so far in professionally managing records and information in Zimbabwe.

REFERENCES


Health affairs, 37(2), 183-190.

Desai, M.S., Hart, J. & Richards, T.C. (2015). An IT manager’s view on e-mail and Internet
policies and procedures. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 36(4), 319-322.


