The value of an Information Policy

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Abstract:-*Information policy is the glue that holds the proper management of information for nations and organisations. Information if not well managed poses challenges to privacy and confidentiality, intellectual rights, security, reliability, accountability and responsibility. This then calls for information policy to maintain proper rules and procedures in the use of formation for effective and efficient information flow. This paper shows the value of having an information policy. The dangers of not having an information policy are articulated which include inconsistency, repetition of work and lack of accountability.*

Keywords: *information, information policy, policy, policy process, strategy, tactics and planning.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Information policy is crucial for the effective and efficiency operations of nations and organisations. There are different information policies but they all have the aim of guiding how information should be managed. The national information policy is broad and other information policies can be derived from it. James (2001:2) avers that good policy with regard to the building of the information society must not rely only on sufficient technical and material resources and skills, but also be coherent with other societal policies. Thus, an information policy is not formulated and implemented in vacuum. It also has to be aligned with other polices. This paper defines policy, the policy process and information policy. It gives the importance of information policy and the dangers of not having an information policy.

II. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this article are:

- Define information policy
- give the importance of having an information policy
- establish the dangers of not having an information policy

Before I can dwell on defining information policy, the importance of having an information policy and the dangers of not having an information policy, it may be sagacious to define policy, and the policy process.

III. WHAT IS POLICY

Policy is a set of principles guiding decision-making. It provides a framework against which proposals or activities can be tested and progress measured (Spasoff, 1999). Ideally, a policy contains a definition of the problem being addressed, a statement of goals (the desired state of affairs), and at least the broad outline of the instruments (approaches and activities) by which the goals are to be achieved. In actual practice, policy making is part of decision making in that policies emanate from these original decisions and become general statements or understandings that channel thinking in future decision making. Policies, while they are usually expressed in positive terms, are essentially limiting in nature since they dictate courses of action and are aimed at preventing deviation from that norm (Stueart and Moran, 1994:42). It is also advised to review policies so that they meet up with environmental changes. Koontz and O'Donnell (1980) define policy as a general statement or understanding that guide thinking in decision making. According to Roper and Williams (1999:70) policy can mean: prudence or wisdom in the management of affairs a definite course or method of action selected from among alternatives a high-level overall plan embracing general goals and acceptable procedures.

In the information and records management context, policy is what gives the lowest level file clerk the authority to deny a senior colleague access to certain categories of classified information or records. Just as the effective use of financial and human resources requires the establishment of financial and human resources policies, so the use of information resources requires a broad set of information policies. The terms policy and planning are sometimes used interchangeably, but this masks some of the harder questions that may have to be

addressed in policy making (Roper and Williams, 1999:70). Information policies incorporate national information policy, ICT, library, Collection Development policies and Records Management policies.

IV.   THE POLICY PROCESS

Policy making is the process of choosing from the range of options those that will be most effective and beneficial. Roper and Williams (1999:70) posit that it is the principal road to making the necessary changes in the establishment of strong mechanisms for effective information policy making, information planning and information management. Choices can be made at different levels. These levels are distinguished as strategy, tactics, policy and planning. Strategy has to do with the art of choosing the right game to play in the first place. It is the designing of an action that is intended to achieve a desired outcome. Tactics has to do with the science of choosing the best approaches for winning that game. Policy is what governs how we conduct ourselves in playing the game. Planning is what we do to convert our tactics into a set of moves.

Walt presents four stages for the policy process (Walt, 1994).
*   Problem identification and issue recognition
*   Policy formulation
*   Policy implementation
*   Policy evaluation

V.   INFORMATION POLICY

Information policy determines the kind of information to be created, acquired, collected, created, organised, stored, accessed, disseminated consumed, used retained and reused. It indicates the authorised people to use the information, whether it is free information or is not for free. It indicates where that information can be obtained and how. BCLA (1998) posit that information policy also establishes the rules within which private information providers and the media operate. According to BCLA (1998), information policy includes the following areas:
*   literacy
*   privatization and distribution of government
*   information
*   freedom of information access
*   protection of personal privacy
*   intellectual property rights
*   retention of archival copies of material
*   Information Rights

The term information policy has been used to refer to policy initiatives that promote the use of tools and concepts associated with global information society with a view to realising their potential in achieving national, social and economic development goals. This means that information policy approaches differ from country to country (James, 2001). An information policy is concerned with identifying, delivering, and managing internal and external information resources needed by employees at all levels of the organisation to perform their jobs as competently and efficiently as possible in order to meet business objectives. An information policy also provides a tool for management to prioritise spending and resources to deliver business-critical information to the enterprise as economically as possible.

Areas typically covered in an information policy include guidelines for:
*   Identification and evaluation of internal content repositories
*   Publishing and dissemination of internal documents
*   Web site publishing standards
*   Archiving and retention of information
*   External content acquisition
*   Use of external (including Internet) information
*   Access levels
*   Security and permission procedures
*   Networks and systems architecture development
*   Training requirements.

A sample high-level outline for a corporate information policy could be as simple as:
*   Background and Objectives
*   Information Needs of the Organization

- Internal information resources and access requirements
- External Information resources and access requirements
- Responsibilities of Teams and Individuals
- Deployment
- Access and Security
- Library, records, archives and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Systems
- Assessment and Review

V1.   LEVELS OF INFORMATION POLICY

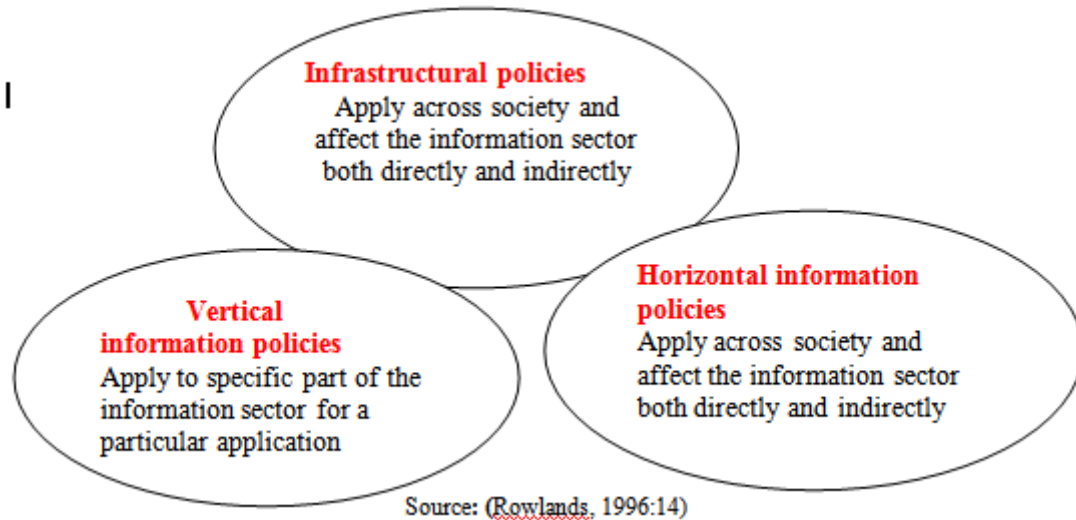Rowlands (1996:14) comes out with three levels for information policy which are:

Source: (Rowlands, 1996:14)

Figure 1: Levels of information policy

Infrastructural policies

James (2001:2) asserts that infrastructural policies would deal with the development of national (or more recently regional) infrastructure required to support an information society. The absence of infrastrucral policies and implementation strategies would make it virtually impossible to deliver on any other vertical or horizontal ICT-related policies. It is thus a prerequisite for progress in other areas. Policy development in Southern Africa reflects this reality in that generally telecommunications policies are the first to be revised, followed by a focus on separate policies in areas such as education, e-commerce, freedom of information, universal service etc.

Vertical Information policies

Vertical information policies include sectorial policies such as education, tourism, manufacturing, health.

Horizontal Information Policies

Horizontal information policies refer to those policies that impact on broad aspects of society, for example, policies relating to freedom on information, tariffs and pricing and the use of ICTs by government internally and in its relationships with for example citizens, business, labour, academia.

V11.   WHY HAVING AN INFORMATION POLICY?

The need and benefits of having an information policy both for the nation and the organisation are shown below:

- Understanding the causes and consequences of policy decisions improves our knowledge of information
- Learning what organisations and nations are doing regarding information
- If a disaster strikes. Knowing how to get the business back on its feet would be all but impossible if no information management policy is in place.
- When new staff come into the organisation, a significant part of their induction will be training on aspects of the information management policy. For example, whenever new files need to be created, it's imperative that a standard is used to capture all the required metadata in a consistent manner so it can be found at a later stage, so an information management policy will introduce consistency of information and record handling right from the start of a new employee's career in your organisation.

- Where an information management policy is well marketed and there is buy-in to it, everyone in the organisation will be aware that their peers expect them to behave in a certain manner for the good of the entire organisation, and this has a profound unifying effect on the management of information throughout the organisation. People will trust one another to implement the policies in their day to day tasks, and find the accessibility of information that other people have created to be a great boon to their own work.
- It becomes possible to integrate all information activities and to mobilize all resources of information to contribute to the totality of the organisation's objectives.
- The information policy provides the basis for objective decision-making on resources for information activities and on the management of information because it is integrated within the framework of corporate objectives and priorities. So any proposed development in the management of information can be considered in relation to how it will contribute to overall objectives and priorities.
- A policy of information allows for continuity in development. It reduces the danger of information initiatives being cut short and the resources invested in them wasted, a hazard to which information services are particularly susceptible in organisations in search of quick cuts in apparent expenditure. The fact that the policy embodies criteria for assessing the contribution that information makes to fulfilling the objectives of the organisation means that it is possible to judge the real gains and losses that would follow from a proposed change in resources.
- Because an information policy is developed by bringing together distributed knowledge of all information resources and activities in the enterprise, it is capable of promoting co-operation and openness rather than hostility or concealment among those who are responsible for different aspects of information management, Orna (1990)
- It calls for the free flows of information that favours successful innovation.
- An information policy makes the basis for sound decisions about investment in Information Communication Technologies because it allows the technology options to be evaluated in relation to the enterprise's key objectives and to its human resources (Orna, 1990).
- The constant monitoring involved in applying an information policy means that the enterprise is capable of changing in response to changes in the internal and external environment, so that it continued to create information activities and information products that meet user's needs.
- The right information is acquired from outside and generated from inside to meet what the organisation needs to do with information.
- Everyone who processes and uses information has the opportunity for learning the appropriate knowledge and skills, for cooperating with one another in supplying them to their work and from developing new ways of using or processing information to help the organisation achieve its objectives.

An information policy is a dynamic tool which can be used:
- To relate everything that is done with information to the enterprise's overall objectives
- Enable effective decisions on resource allocation
- Promote interaction, communication and mutual support between all parts of the enterprise and between the enterprise and its "customer or public".
- Provide objective criteria for assessing the results of information-based activities.
- Give feedback to the process of developing the corporate policies of the enterprise.

It would be a mistake to think that only nations and large organisations and those which make intensive use of information need a policy for information. In fact an organisation can benefit from information policy which is designed specifically for its own needs. As an information professional, you play a great role in the formulation and implementation of information policies in your organisations and the nation at large.

V11I. DANGERS OF NOT HAVING ORGANIZATIONAL INFORMATION POLICY

These are some of the dangers that are identified by not having an organisational information policy:
- There is decentralisation of information activities and systems due to lack of policy.
- If the information policy is not available, there is danger of the control of information activities by people who have, by the nature of their professional background, a limited understanding of how enterprises work and are managed and a restricted conception of what information is about and how it can be used. There are, for example, a lot of people with "information" in their job titles, who are well qualified in such fields as Mathematics, Data Processing, Accountancy and Engineering, but whose education and work experience has not included the theoretical basis of information, or modern methods of handling textual information as in the case of Librarians, Records Managers and all Information Professionals.

- Inappropriate information activities will be witnessed which are unrelated to the enterprise's main objectives. For example, there might be information products which previously had a justification but today no longer serve any useful purpose.
- Failures in attempts to introduce innovative products and services as well as processes. There can be poor communication of information as a major cause of failure in providing innovative products and services. This include lack of communication with users on what they need, deliberate ignoring of outside advice and failure to provide information to the users of the product.
- Duplication of work can occur due to the lack of an information policy
- Inconsistancy in the way information will be managed.
- Lack of transparency. It would not be able to see what actions are being taken hence resulting in improper actions like corruption.

IX.   CONCLUSION

The absence of an information policy cause lost of havoc in a nation and originations. It is imperative that organisation should embrace the implementation of information policies for continuity and transparency. The information policy makes work easier as there are clear guidelines that are to be followed. However, it should be noted that the information policy should always be updated to keep abreast with the internal and external changes in the environment,

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