Managing Personal Records in the College of Agriculture Education (Cagric) of the University of Education, Winneba: The Challenges and the Way Forward

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Abstract:
The University employs staff and when these categories of staff are employed, personal records are created for them in the form of hard copies. Although computers were once thought to be ushering in the age of the paperless offices, the College of Agriculture Education of the University of Education, Winneba is still experiencing exponential growth and reproduction of records. Besides, the management of personal information has become a bit cumbersome due to their bulky nature, longevity and sensitivity. Therefore, it is essential for the College to develop sound personal records management strategies that are grounded in thoughtful and effective procedures to present summaries of personal records and details of employees at the lowest cost with respect to time and effort. It is imperative that the adoption and implementation of this proposed database system of personal record keeping, which is supposed to run side by side with the paper based personal records, will increase accessibility to personal information faster search and retrieval, improve efficiency and productivity and provide adequate security for vital personal information.

1. Introduction
The human resource (staff) is one of the most important assets of work organizations. The staff combines with the other assets of an organization for the realization of organizational goals and objectives. However, to ensure that staff with the requisite skills, knowledge and abilities is employed for efficient and effective utilization, there should be in place proper mechanisms for proper documentation of the recruitment, selection, interview and appointment process. The generation, storage and retrieval of staff personal records are an important aspect of organizational management and administration.

In work organizations, employee records are kept in personal files, either digital or manual. An employee's personal file is 'the main employee file that contains the history of the employment relationship from employment application through exit interview and employment termination documentation'. Only Human Resources staff and the employee's immediate supervisor and the Head of the establishment may have access to the information and that information never leaves the Human Resources Office.

With the current manpower of Two Hundred and Ten (210) employees (as at March, 2015) in the College of Agriculture Education, University of Education, Winneba, management and administration of personal information has become a bit cumbersome due to their bulky nature, longevity and sensitivity. This paper seeks to delve into the importance of personal records in university administration; examine the challenges in managing personal records at CAGRIC and suggests ways to offer improved services to Management of the College for effective and efficient decision making strategies.

2. Importance of Records in University Administration
Records serve many functions in the day-to-day operations of any serious establishment including, higher educational institutions. In the course of managing the College of Agriculture Education of the University for effective teaching and learning and providing appropriate community service, the College creates records through a variety of activities such as procurement contract transactions, admissions and examinations, committee meetings, general correspondence and other external and internal transactions. These records may be generated and transmitted in a variety of ways such as handwritten, typewritten, computer generated and audio visual.

The purpose and essence of any record management system is to locate the right information in the right place in the right order, at the right time for the right person at the lowest cost. For this feat to be achieved, an integrated records management system is needed. Enwere (1992) argues that the unintegrated records management system in public establishments has resulted in inefficiency in administration and to the loss or unavailability of vital information required for decision making.

Stressing on the use of technology in records management, McDonald (1995) opines that in developing record keeping solutions, it is necessary to understand the evolution that is taking place in the use of technology. The application of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to the management of personal records, therefore, will go a long way in making personal records more accessible and useable in the College.

Staff personal records may be seen as records that contain initial application forms, results of physical examination, interview notations, periodic appraisals, disciplinary actions, transfer and promotions. Other information required on personal records may include full name, address, telephone number, age, sex, marital status, number of children/dependants amongst a host of others. In a situation where there is inadequate or out-dated information on an employee, it is more likely that a wrong decision might be made in respect of the employee.

In the College of Agriculture Education of the University of Education, Winneba, staff personal records are utilized in support of public accountability and good governance. In view of this, there is the need for up-to-date and accurate information on which to make decisions. Such information need to be gathered so that a well-informed decision can be made for the advancement of the University.

3. Management and Administration of Personal Records in the College of Agriculture Education of the University of Education, Winneba

One important aspect of personal records management is the need for the created records to be adequately maintained for use. It has been noted that the College of Agriculture Education has a proper storage medium and filing procedures and that access to personal records is quick and easy. Personal records are stored in steel cabinets which are located at the Principal's Secretariat (HR Unit is within the Principal's Secretariat). These records have been categorized in terms of employment status, *viz* Senior Members, Junior and Senior Staff. However, active and inactive personal records are kept together. The filing index in use at the College guarantees fast and accurate retrieval of personal information. Access to personal records is restricted to protect the records from alteration or change.

Currently, the Human Resource Office is managing personal files of employees at post and those who have retired or resigned from the services of the University and/or the deceased. The breakdown is as follows:

No.	Category of Staff	Number	
		Active	Inactive
1.	Senior Members -Teaching	35	5
2.	Senior Members – Non-Teaching	15	1
3.	Senior Staff	58	12
4.	Junior Staff	101	19
	Total	209	37

Table 1: statistical data on personal files kept at the Human Resource office, CAGRIC

It could be deduced from *table 1* that the Human Resource Unit of the College has to deal with Two Hundred and Forty-six (246) personal files (both active and inactive) for the provision of vital and accurate information on all categories of staff to enable Management make informed decisions. It is a fact that timely and legal destruction of records helps organizations to enhance efficiency, lower storage cost and minimizes the exposure to litigation on records that are no longer needed by the University. However, the College is compelled to preserve all personal records (hard copies) for historical value since this personal information could not be found anywhere else other than the hard copy state (paper files). In actual sense, such records should have been disposed off appropriately based on some mandatory instructions.

4. Challenges in Managing Personal Records at the College of Agriculture Education of the University of Education, Winneba

Traditionally, paper records were managed long after creation and once they were physically filed into filing systems, they begun to take up valuable office space. This situation is a real manifestation at the College.

Currently, there are no approved and acceptable guidelines to manage personal records in the various Departments/Sections/Units of the College. Some administrative staff are unable to determine which of the information resources can be classified as personal records. Other challenges associated with the management of personal records in the College include insufficient skilled and experienced record management personnel at some Departments/Units/Sections and low priority of records management in the scheme of things at some Departments/Units/Sections. As a consequence of this, there is the need for proper personal record management in the College. This will help in planning, decision making and implementation of management decisions.

For a personal record to remain reliable, authentic, with its integrity maintained and useable for as long as the record is needed, it is necessary to preserve its content, context, and sometimes its structure. A trustworthy record management must be incorporated in the planning and implementation of the system and must take place immediately upon creation as the College classifies its working information for further use.

In today's working environment, personal records are now implicit more in terms of function, content, context, and structure. This shift in discerning has resulted in large extent from the rise of electronic records, in which records may be stored as bits and bytes dispersed across a storage device or media and assembled into a complete record only when viewed.

5. The Way Forward

A common approach to improving personal information management in the College of Agriculture Education of the University of Education, Winneba is to create digital copies of personal records that must be consistent over time. Personal records must be managed so that it is possible to demonstrate that the content has not mutated or been altered. Digitized documents can often be located, accessed and used much more quickly than the hard copies. It is observed that digitized personal records, linked to a Human Resource Information System (HRIS), can be powerful medium to improve the efficiency of human resource management. A personal record system should run effectively whether it is in a purely paper-based environment or in the emerging electronic environment.

Article 7.3.5 of the Corporate Strategic Plan (2014-2018) of the University of Education, Winneba stipulates that good record keeping practices would be incorporated, including the use of databases. As a result, a database has been developed to convert personal records into digitized formats. The software could be housed in a central file repository or on a centrally located computer in a non-networked office (H/R) that is secured and backed up on a regular basis. The proposed database, however, is to be run alongside with the hard copy personal records. It is not to replace completely the existing system of personal record management in force at the College (hard copy files) due to the erratic power supply in the Ghanaian economy.

Information contained in the database is patterned after the '*Update of Personal Forms'* in force in the University. As with all other record-keeping systems, some features have been incorporated into the design of the database to keep the personal information up to date. Records that will be kept on the database will be secured from loss, deletion or alteration, so that the records are preserved and made accessible for as long as they are needed.

The database will help the Human Resource Unit of the College to perform routine administrative tasks more efficiently and cost-effective. For instance, the database can be used to determine the legitimacy of registered dependant(s) of individual employees when making payment of medical claims to employees.

The database has three sections *viz. Personal, Employment and Payment*. It has two distinct fields, namely '*Tables and Forms'*. Personal information on all categories of staff will be recorded on the individual forms; Personal (Appendix I), Employment (Appendix II) and Payment (Appendix III). The summaries of the records on the individual forms would then be generated automatically on a Table (*Appendix IV*).

The provision of adequate summary of records of employment improves the management of personal records. In other words, this system could be used to summarize employment, personal and payroll records of all categories of staff of the College.
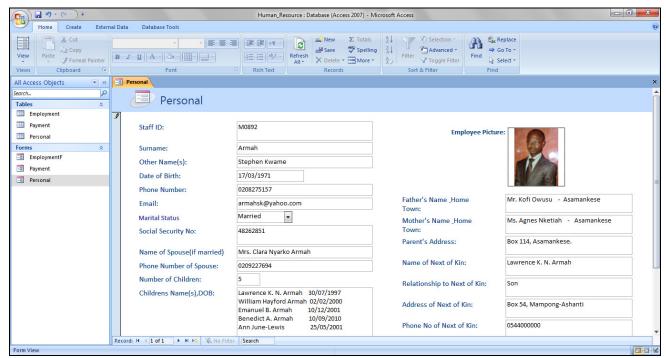
6. Conclusion

Creation and maintenance of personal records are expensive in all spheres. As a result, university administrators are especially concerned with the cost of filing operations associated with it. Personal records managers are always concerned with having the correct information at the correct time and place, despite the consequences in respect of the cost. It is obvious that as technology advances and the information age matures, one fact remains clear, rapid access to information on all media is essential for use in providing essential services to the university community, making decisions and doing effective and efficient business.

The difficult task of securing confidential information is simplified with a digital document management system. Whereas paper files need to be stored in secure cabinets and controlled using a manual access system, electronic documents are easily encrypted with access controls using passwords and an authentication system. Electronic files never go missing, nor do they easily fall into the wrong hands.
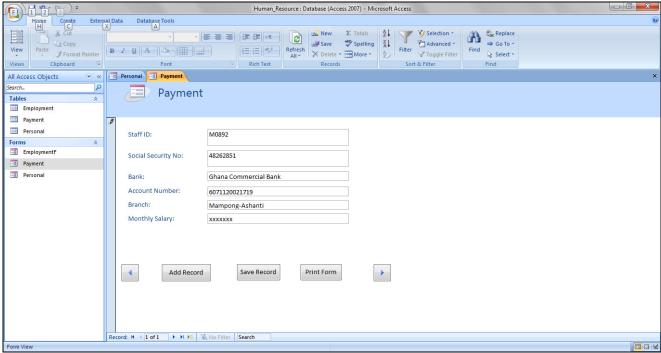
7. References
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ii. Mcdonald, I. (1995). Managing Records in the Modern Office: taming the wild frontier. Archivaria 39 (spring), p. 70-76.
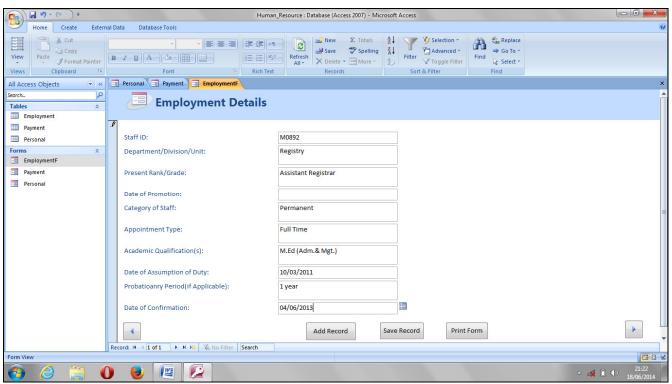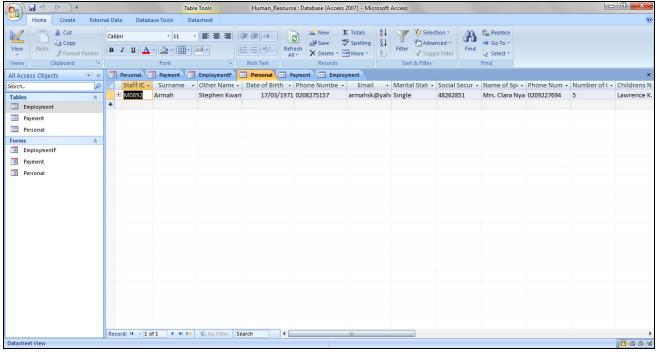iii. University of Education, Winneba: Corporate Strategic Plan 2014-2018, p. 24.

Annexure

Appendix I: Details of personal records of employees

Appendix II: Payment details of employees

Appendix III: Employment details of an employee

Appendix IV: Summary of personal records for a number of employees