
An Assessment of Public Sector Records Management: The Case of Audit Service Sierra Leone

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Abstract: *This study investigated records management at Audit Service Sierra Leone (ASSL) and how it impacts operational efficiency. Management and staff of ASSL formed the basis of the population studied. Mixed method approach was used as research methodology. The study revealed that hybrid records are generated by ASSL and received from varied sectors in society. That there is a nexus between proper records management and auditing at ASSL and that there are different users of records who include management and staff of ASSL, legal officers, Anti-Corruption Commission staff, Government functionaries and researchers. That although managing records is impactful but this is not without challenges which affect the day-to-day operations of the ASSL.*

Keywords: Sierra Leone, audit, audit institutions, records, records management, information management, public records, public sector management

INTRODUCTION

Managing records is an integral component in public institutions as they generate, receive, accumulate and manage a vast amount of information and documentation in their daily operations. Effective records management in these organizations is vital for enhancing efficiency, ensuring compliance with relevant regulations and policies and enabling the seamless retrieval and utilization of data and records (Thomassen, 2021). By implementing robust records management practices, public institutions can streamline their operations, improve decision-making and enhance transparency and accountability. Proper records management also supports compliance with legal, regulatory and policy requirements, mitigating risks and potential liabilities. Well-managed records provide a valuable source of institutional knowledge and historical information, enabling institutions to leverage their data and make more informed decisions that benefit their stakeholders and the communities they serve.

Records management evolved from a mere administrative function to a strategic imperative in modern organizations where the ability to effectively manage information assets can be critical to

their success or failure (Touray, 2021). In today's data-driven world, organizations rely heavily on their information assets to drive innovation and maintain a competitive edge. This is particularly true of public institutions which most times grapple with large volumes of sensitive records and attempt to ensure effective information governance so as to maintain public trust and comply with regulations. By so doing public organizations can better preserve their institutional memory, facilitate evidenced-based policymaking and demonstrate responsible stewardship of public resources (Ngoepe and Saurombe,2016).

Background to the study

The 1962 Audit Act led to the establishment of the Audit Service Sierra Leone(ASSL) to replace the Colonial Audit Service. The Auditor General's legislative authority and responsibilities are derived from the 1978 Constitution as amended by the 1991 Constitution, the Public Budgeting and Accounting Act of 1992 and the Audit Service Act of 1998. In accordance with Section 119(1-4) of the 1991 Constitution and Sections 63-69 of the Public and Accounting Act of 1992 Auditor Service Sierra Leone (ASSL) is the supreme audit institution in the country mandated by Law to ensure that public funds are managed and used judiciously. It is the duty of the ASSL to promote accountability and transparency in the public sector by conducting independent audits of Government Ministries, Departments and Agencies(MDAs), central and local councils, public enterprises, the Central Bank (Bank of Sierra Leone), state-owned-commercial banks, and other financial corporations as enshrined in Section 119 of the 1991 Constitution, the Audit Service Act of 2014 and the Public Management Act of 2016.

Headed by the Auditor General and supported by a team of auditors, the ASSL has over two hundred staff most of whom work as auditors in Government MDAs. In addition to the headquarter office in Freetown, there are over ten divisional branches in the western area and three offices in the provincial regions. The mission statement of the ASSL is "to independently ensure value for money from public funds in collaboration with external stakeholders through a highly competent and motivated workforce integrity." Its vision statement is "to be a leading audit organization promoting excellence and accountability in public institutions."

The proper handling of records is essential in tracking financial transactions, verifying compliance and supporting decision-making in audit institutions. At the ASSL records management is integrated into its overall organizational framework to ensure the secure storage, retrieval and disposal of critical audit records. The Auditor General oversees records management policies and ensures that audited records are properly maintained to support accountability and transparency. The ASSL Board provides guidance on compliance with records management regulations, ensuring that all documents are handled according to legal and professional standards.

Statement of the problem

Proper records management is essential in ensuring organizational efficiency and facilitating quick access to information, improving decision-making and ensuring regulatory compliance. As an audit institution the ASSL relies heavily on the availability, accessibility and accuracy of records to perform its duties. Poor records management could impede on the ability of staff to deliver timely audit reports thus, undermining the mandate of the Organization. ASSL's Management has been making frantic efforts to modernize its records management systems by incorporating digital solutions. This transition presents an opportunity to investigate the impact of records management at the ASSL on organizational efficiency and how management has been addressing associated challenges. Previous studies on the ASSL's records managing system largely focused on legal compliance and archival aspects of records management thus, leaving a gap in understanding how effective records management can contribute to improved organizational performance. By understanding how effective records management can affect ASSL's operations this will provide valuable insights into the link between records keeping and organizational efficiency. Thus, this study aims to fill that lacunae.

Aim and objectives of the study

Aim

This study aims to examine the role of records management at ASSL in enhancing organizational efficiency. This study seeks to assess how effective records management can contribute to improved productivity, decision making and operational efficiency within the Organization.

Objectives

The objectives of the study are to:

- i. identify the types of records generated/received and how they are organized and managed at the ASSL;
- ii. explore whether or not there is a nexus between effective records management at the ASSL and organizational efficiency;
- iii. identify the users of records at the ASSL and reasons for use;
- iv. seek information on the impact and challenges faced by ASSL in utilizing records.

Research Questions

In order to attain the above objectives, the following questions were asked:

- i. What types of records that are generated/received and how are they organized and management at the ASSL?
- ii. Is there a nexus between records management and auditing at the ASSL?

- iii. Who are the users of records at the ASSL and why do they utilize records?
- iv. What are the impact and challenges of records management on service delivery at the ASSL?

Significance, Scope and Delimitations of the Study

This study is significant as it highlights the role of records management in ensuring the enhancement of ASSL's efficiency. Effective records management ensures timely access to information, supports decision making, improves productivity and enhances compliance with legal and regulatory requirements.

As scope the study covers a five-year period (2021 to 2026). By focusing on this period the study provides a comprehensive analysis of the role of records management in enhancing efficiency at the ASSL capturing key changes, improvement and challenges in the system.

The study is delimited to the ASSL's headquarters in Freetown which is the pivot of the Organization. This boundary is set to maintain a manageable scope and focus on the primary operational centre of the Organization. The study also concentrates on records management practices and it employs a mix method approach. It targets staff members only, especially those directly involved in records management practices such as administrative staff, records officers and audit staff.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Odendaal (2009) defined auditing as an independent validation or of representations in the form of financial statements by management of an entity. The word itself is derived from the Latin *audire* which means "to listen." Auditing gained its roots from Accounting and it existed primarily as a method to maintain governmental accounting and recordkeeping its mainstay (Manal, 2011). According to McNamee and McNamee (1995) the earliest audited records were Babylonian clay tablets some 5000 years ago. Allison as quoted by Isa (2009) posited that auditing has changed from the way it was used in Accounting for the checking of financial reliability of a business to a process where a record is maintained of a particular series of events in order to provide evidence, in the case of a dispute to check on the effectiveness of control systems, and to provide evidence in the case of criminal activity. These records are commonly known as audit trails or logs which according to Phukubje (2011) are sequences in which auditors work can be independently verified while a working paper is where auditors test transactions and items. Audits are carried out in terms of structured approach consisting of a planning, execution investigative and reporting phase. In conducting an audit, auditors follow unique investigative process and procedures in order to express an informed opinion on the recruiting entity's financial and other information (De Jager, 2008).

Auditing services are intricately linked with records management within organizations, serving as critical mechanism for verifying the integrity, accuracy and reliability of records that underpin organizational operations and decision-making (Ramlee et al.,2018). Audit services examine an organization's records to verify compliance with guidelines, protocols, and regulations. This highlights the need to maintain records with precision and ensure accessibility. In contemporary governance landscape the significance of records cannot be overstated, especially in facilitating institutional audits and promoting good governance. Effective records management enhances corporate governance by ensuring accessibility, integrity, reliability and authenticity of organizational records. It fosters transparency and accountability, enabling management to make informed decision and fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities. A close relationship between government structures and records management systems strengthens overall organizational performance and protects stakeholders' interests. Proper records management is pivotal in minimizing business and legal risks by providing verifiable evidence of transactions and activities. It reduces the probability of fraudulent activities, ensures compliance with legislative requirements, and protects organizations from false accusations.

Internal audits and management reviews are fundamental pillars ensuring the continuous improvement and effectiveness of quality management systems particularly under ISO 9001:2015 Standards. Wolniak(2021) asserted that internal audits serve as systematic independent evaluations intended to assess the conformity of an organization's processes and against set criteria. They verify compliance with both internal procedures and International Organization Standards while also evaluating the overall effectiveness of the management system.

In the information-driven twenty-first century society records management has evolved from a clerical task into a strategic function essential for organizational success, transparency and memory preservation. In a world dominated by digital transformation, e-governance and cybersecurity threats records management underpins everything from public sector transparency to corporate accountability. Governments and organizations depend on reliable records management to maintain public trust and ensure effective service delivery. Failures in proper records management can result in data breaches, loss of legal evidence, erosion of public confidence and even financial collapse, proving that records are now among the most crucial assets and organization can possess. Proper records management practices enhance organizational resilience against crises, from cyberattacks to litigation. It also strengthens democratic process by ensuring transparency and citizens' rights to information. On a cultural level effective records management preserves historical memory in a time when digital content is remarkably fragile and easily lost. Proper records management ensures that information flows effectively which is crucial for an organization to successfully fulfill its mission, safeguard vital information, and preserve organizational knowledge (Read-Smith et al.,1996). Barrett (2007) and Vallis (2009) opined that comprehensive records management facilitates operational transparency, accountability and efficiency. These authors argued that modern organizations cannot achieve robust or high-performance standards

without integrating sound records practices into their core operations. However, implementing effective records managements systems is not without challenges. Studies (e.g. Barrett, 2007; Touray,2021; Claude,2024) highlighted numerous obstacles including technological complexity, user resistance, lack of standardized polices and insufficient resource allocation. Best practices identified in the literature include the need for policy frameworks, executive sponsorship, employee training and integration of records management with broader organizational strategies. By addressing these challenges organizations can realise the full benefits of records management, ensuring that critical information assets are systematically accessible and secure. Claude (2024) stressed that effective records management is not merely an administrative task but a cornerstone of human resource management and public sector governance. Public institutions generate vast quantities of records through their daily operations and transactions. Managing these records systematically can ensure accountability to citizens, support transparent Human Resource practices and preserve institutional memory critical for policy continuity and public trust.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed from responses to the questionnaire administered to Management and staff of ASSL using mixed method approach. Analysis was by percentages represented in the form of Tables of Frequency. A total of one hundred and five (105) questionnaires were administered of which ninety (98) were returned in usable form thus, giving a response rate of 96.01%.

Objective 1: Identifying types of records generated /received at ASSL and how they are organized and managed.

Table 1: Types of records generated/received at ASSL

Ratings	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	98	100%
No	-	-
Total	98	100%

From Table 1 it is evident that all the participants at ASSL indicated that they generate and receive records in their daily operations and that these records are in hybrid format. That since there is no central registry each of the generating/receiving divisions manages its own records and these are in the care of divisional secretaries, supervised by the heads of divisions. That these records are kept in such storage facilities as cupboards, cabinets, memory sticks, cloud, computers, hard drives and discs as well as CD plates. And that there is a policy regulation guiding records management at the ASSL, which for them is a fundamental requirement for institutional audits and operational

efficiency. Participants added that because of the sensitive nature of the records they generate/receive there is restricted access. In order to facilitate effective use staff are frequently trained to ensure confidentiality in their daily operations.

Objective 2: The nexus between records management and auditing

This objective sought information on the nexus between records keeping and auditing at ASSL as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Nexus between records management and auditing

Ratings	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	90	91.8
Agree	8	8.2
Undecided	-	-
Strongly Disagree	-	-
Disagree	-	-
Total	98	100

The second objective sought information on whether or not there is a nexus between records management and auditing at the ASSL. It is crystal clear from Table 2 that a significant 91.8 % indicated Strongly Agree that there is a nexus between records management and auditing while 8.2% indicated that they Agree that there is a nexus between records management and auditing at ASSL. These ratings are suggestive that audit service is intricately linked with records management within organizations. Since audit service is based on examination of records generated/received in organizations to verify staff's compliance with best practices it is essential that records are properly managed. This can help identify potential vulnerabilities so that appropriate mitigating measures can be recommended.

Objective 3: Users of records and reasons for use at ASSL

This objective is descriptive and did not require the use of a Table. However, participants stated the following as major users of records at the ASSL:

- i. Management and staff at ASSL;
- ii. Anti-Corruption Commission staff
- iii. Members of the ASSL's Board of Directors
- iv. Government functionaries from MDAs;

- v. Authorized researchers;
- vi. Researchers;
- vii. The National Public Archives Staff.

On reasons for the utilization of records at the ASSL participants stated the following:

- i. For auditing Government MDAs;
- ii. For decision making;
- iii. For research purposes
- iv. To complement teaching/learning activities in tertiary and higher institutions of learning;
- v. To guide public institutions in their operational duties;
- vi. To ensure transparency and accountability and promote Good Governance;
- vii. Assist staff of the Anti-Corruption Commission to effectively investigate graft in public institutions;
- viii. To ensure that non-current records are transferred to the National Public Archives for preservation; and
- ix. To facilitate research.

Objective 4: Impact and challenges of records management at the ASSL.

This objective is descriptive and did not require the use of a Table. However, participants acknowledged the impact of records management in their daily operational duties. According to participants, records management plays a pivotal role in ensuring the effectiveness, success and competitiveness of ASSL, necessitating the strategic management of internal information. According to them the provision of well-defined policies and procedures on records management is not merely an administrative task but a fundamental requirement for institutional audits and operational efficiency. That records management significantly impacts the provision of timely, accurate and accessible information thus, enabling management and staff to make informed decisions at ASSL. Participants asserted that they use their records management system as a benchmark in auditing public institutions in the country. The reason being every success annual report by the Auditor General points out poor records management in public institutions as a major challenge which does not only hinder productivity and compromise effective service delivery but also form the basis for graft in such institutions.

As challenges participants stated the following:

- i. lack of a central registry and professional staff to hold and manage records;
- ii. poor storage facilities;
- iii. intermittent trainings given to staff on records management;
- iv. failure to digitize non-current physical records;

- v. delay in transferring noncurrent records to the National Public Archives;
- vi. poor funding for records management;
- vii. poor conservation and preservation methods of non-current records;
- viii. failure by management to appoint records officers to manage records rather than using secretaries to serve in that capacity; and
- ix. issues of trust between managers and staff as to who handles classified records and for how long.

From the analysis it is clear that managing records at ASSL is crucial since the institution does not only deal with its own sensitive records but also those of other public institutions. Losing records to poor management could mean the operations of the institution are unverifiable.

CONCLUSION

The study examined records management at ASSL in enhancing organizational efficiency. The analysis was guided by four major objectives providing a structured lens to understand the nexus between records management and auditing in a critical public sector institution mandated to promote transparency and accountability in public institutions in Sierra Leone.

The first objective was about the types of records generated/received at ASSL. The findings established that the ASSL generates/receives records of different types and that they are hybrid. These records encompass audit trails and reports, auditing manuals, correspondences, personnel management, financial statements, internal memos, procurement records, Policy Regulations and ACTS and Bills all of which bear relevance to Auditing activities in the country. These hybrid records support diverse operational functions especially in tracking financial transactions and maintaining accountability frameworks in Government MDAs. However, it was observed that although the ASSL has a Policy on managing records but this was not prepared by a records professional thus, leading to gaps in standardization, consistency, and alignment with international best practices. It also limits ASSL's ability to enforce consistent procedures in records management activities in public institutions thereby increasing the risk of inefficiency and compliance failures in the country. These findings align with Shepherd and Yeo's (2003) assertion that all organizations need records and that regulatory frameworks on records management be provided and grounded in professional standards to ensure systematic organization, retrieval and compliance. Similarly, Ngoepe and Saurombe (2016) opined that effective policy frameworks in public institutions are crucial in safeguarding information assets while supporting operational efficiency and legal compliance.

The second objective was about the existence of a nexus between records management and auditing at ASSL. The findings were that there is a nexus between the two. The reliability of audit services is influenced by its sources and nature namely the records audit is conducted on. These are evaluated by individuals who critically assess them according to generally accepted standards

for accuracy and fairness in reporting. De Jager (2008) posited that audits follow various investigative processes and procedures in order to express an opinion on the veracity of an organization's financial and other information. These procedures and activities are performed in identifiable stages namely planning, execution, and reporting, collectively referred to as auditing processes (Ngoepe and Ngulube, 2015). Thus, it is essential that records management be integrated into the auditing process in order to effectively enable it (the audit process) to ensure transparency, accountability and good governance in public institutions.

The third objective was about the users of records at the ASSL and their reasons for utilization. The study identified Management and staff at ASSL; Anti-Corruption Commission staff; Members of the ASSL's Board of Directors; Government functionaries from MDAs; Authorized researchers; and The National Public Archives Staff as primary users of records at the ASSL. According to participants records are utilized for diverse reasons to include:

- i. auditing Government MDAs;
- ii. decision making;
- iii. research purposes
- iv. compliment teaching/learning activities in tertiary and higher institutions of learning;
- v. guide public institutions in their operational duties;
- vi. ensure transparency and accountability and promote Good Governance;
- vii. assist staff of the Anti-Corruption Commission to effectively investigate graft in public institutions;
- viii. ensure that non-current records are transferred to the National Public Archives for preservation; and
- ix. Facilitate research.

These finding underscore the centrality of records management in public sector institutions, ensuring that audit processes are evidence-based and decision-making is informed by accurate historical data. The findings resonate with the views of Ngoepe (2014) that effective records management supports stakeholders' needs by facilitating quick, accurate and reliable information retrieval for governance and operational purposes. Ramlee et al. (2018) asserted that records serve as the backbone for transparency and accountability in public institutions, thus, echoing the findings of this study.

The forth objective assessed the impact and challenges of records management at the ASSL. Records management at ASSL was found to :

- i. enable timely and accurate audits;
- ii. safeguard institutional memory and operational knowledge transfer;
- iii. improve staff productivity by reducing by reducing time spent in locating records;
- iv. facilitate informed and evidence-based decision-making; and

- v. Enhance transparency and accountability, thereby strengthening public trust in auditing practices and reporting.

These finding align with Barrett's (2007) views that effective records management underpins operational transparency, accountability and efficiency in organizations. Vallis (2009) similarly noted that systematic record-keeping is integral in improving performance standards within institutions. Wolniak (2021) also emphasized the significance of aligning records management ISO9001:2015 Standards for quality management, which can support continuous improvement and operational efficiency in essential service institutions such as ASSL.

However, in spite of the impact of records management the findings also identified several challenges which hinder optimal efficiency at ASSL. These challenges were:

- i. lack of a central registry and professional staff to hold and manage records;
- ii. poor storage facilities;
- iii. intermittent trainings given to staff on records management;
- iv. failure to digitize non-current physical records;
- v. delay in transferring noncurrent records to the National Public Archives;
- vi. poor funding for records management;
- vii. poor conservation and preservation methods of non-current records;
- viii. failure by management to appoint records officers to manage records rather than using secretaries to serve in that capacity; and
- ix. Issues of trust between managers and staff as to who handles classified records and for how long.

These challenges reflect global findings on public sector institutions' records management practices. Lumombya (2010) posited that poor records management systems in developing countries often hinder productivity and effective service delivery in public institutions. Similarly, Mohamed, Rasheli and Mwagike (2018) noted that the absence of effective digitization strategies and professional management structures limits retrieval efficiency and increase operational risks within public sector institutions. Clement et al. (2022) argued that inadequate records management in the digital age exposes institutions to security threats, operational disruptions and reputational damage.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are worthy of note:

There is a need for management to invest in records digitization and automation. They should implement Electronic Document and Records Management Systems (EDRMS) for secured, centralized and efficient retrieval of records. They should also ensure regular and cybersecurity protocols. Management should develop a comprehensive Records Management Policy. The

services of an experienced records professional or archivist in policy formulation be sought. This professional will develop a records management policy aligned with national legal frameworks and ISO 9001:2015. Management should employ trained and qualified records staff that will be entrusted with the management of records at ASSL. These staff should collaborate with the archivists at the National Public Archives for the transfer of non-current records to the Archives. Structured trainings on best records management practices be given to ASSL records management staff. Management should also integrate records audit into ASSL's internal audit processes to identify the gaps and track improvement systematically. A Records Management Unit be created at the ASSL to handle all the records generated/received; management should develop clear access control policies on records management, ensure appropriate accessibility and provide benchmarks on records management for the benefit of public institutions ASSL audits. Management should collaborate with Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) in the sub-region in order to adopt best practices in records management. Over and above all management should improve the current storage facilities for manual records at the ASSL and gradually transition from manual to electronic records management.

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