

TRANSPARENCY AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION: BACK OFFICE BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

It is estimated that the public information shown on transparency and open data portals, without denying that it is very important information for purposes of accountability, recognition of government efforts and knowledge exchange between the public and private sphere, is only 15% of all the public information available to organisations in structured and, above all, non-structured data. In order to promote profitable information exchange between public and private agents that enables favourable evolution and generates business opportunities, it is vital to recognise all of the public information available to an organisation. This remaining 85% will provide a body of highly valuable gross information. The key lies in how this information is organised; it must be available at all times and disseminated through the most appropriate channels. Organising back office information is therefore essential.

Legislative development around Transparency, Access to Public Information and Good Governance must reveal the need for a well-organised, competitive back office. Managing and reusing information and disseminating the most important and most complete quality information all require major work within government agencies. One cannot believe that the information posted on transparency or open data portals is of any quality if there is no proof of where it came from or that it has not been reworked or made over. Such portals, full of good intentions, seem to be the first step towards a cultural change in the relationship between the Administration towards the public and the public towards the Administration. There is scepticism that this new perception won't turn out to be just another myth from those who stigmatise the Administration in regard to records management. We know a few: the 'single window', the 'paper-free office', the 'citizen portfolio'... and now there's one on presumed universal access to public information. Needless to say it is laudable to think about citizens—in fact, it is not a question of goodwill, but of a democratic demand—but people should also be told that most good initiatives end up not being implemented properly due to lack of support for real internal restructuring and to the lack of continuous assessment of the management processes that generate records, that manage information and that produce data.

And that fact is that administrations' 'kitchen', where the authentic reliable record is produced that will serve as the legal basis for defending rights and the demand for citizens' duties, must be 'clean', operational and ready whenever it's required. In this kitchen all the utensils must be tidy, in their place and fit for use when needed. If we understand that the 'kitchen' may be called management offices, central archives, administrative archives or historical archives, then it is easy to see just what made the implementation of most of these great mythical reforms fail. Promotion of democratic reinforcement based on the free communication of public information can only be done by proving that the internal management of such information is not only a combination of good practices, but that it can really be called a system. In this context, archives and records management play a fundamental role.

New legislation, and its regulatory development in each government agency, must understand and make us understand that without this review of information management processes and without the continuous assessment of the processes of drawing up

records, proposals will not be fulfilled. There is no quality public information without quality documents. There can be no transparency if we cannot prove that the data on portals did not come from reliable bona fide information from within the Administration. There will always be some doubt as to whether they are reliable or not. A good transparency or open data portal is that which links the data and information it provides to authentic internal references, amends data and information in coherent terms and provides proof of their excellence and quality.

How do we do that? By making the records management strategy that supplies the information and knowledge system operating in the organisation transparent, too, and by linking these processes to systems of certifiable quality and excellence without delay. In this respect, it may be that being ISO 9001 certified is not enough, as it reviews organisational processes wholesale, but doesn't detail records preparation and management processes. Rather, we need to advance towards a more specialised standard, such as ISO 15489, which is theoretical and provides more guidance and method on the definition of records management policies and its real implementation, and, above all, the ISO 30300 family led by ISO 303001, which are clearly directed at the auditing of systems already implemented for their certification as quality and excellence systems. Archivists and records managers have been using this international standard for some time, but never with the support necessary. It has always been a bit shaky. The gap between good practice and the availability of funds and staff for comprehensive introduction has always been too big. Because these are long-term processes of continuous improvement, which must be sustainable and require an awareness of quality on the part of organisations that they are not always willing to assume. The government must ensure excellence in its services. It must be said again, the succession of incomplete myths in the various government agencies can be explained by the fact that an organisational reform and complete review of the records preparation process have never been undertaken.

The need for renewal and reform is not only a matter of common sense; it is obvious, for example, in the very recent document drawn up in the context of the Forum of Organisations for the Reform of the Administration and submitted to the Government of Catalonia. It contains many of the demands that archivists and records managers have been making for ever. In fact, we subscribe wholeheartedly. It demands that this reform be implemented by qualified professionals, and—if necessary—with recourse to public-private collaboration. In large part, this document asks that government agencies stop repeating the same old mistakes. In the case of records management, two such mistakes are: purchasing products that appeared to reorganise records preparation processes all by themselves or giving the job to staff with no training in records management in the belief that you only need to be reasonably 'organised' to do it.

The introduction of e-Government enabled large business sectors linked to ICT and records management to move towards the setting up of electronic offices, the introduction of the electronic signature or the development of e-billing solutions and contracting portals, to name but a few. Although considerable efforts have been made to introduce records management and image or audiovisual digital asset management software, amongst others, there is still hardly any real conviction of the need for a comprehensive system to control records production environments that offers a comprehensive view and operational capacity. As with everything, real capacity and means depend on the size of the organisation, but we never tire of saying that the

professionals faced with this task must have a comprehensive view if they are to meet the challenge. And the same demand must be made of the business sectors providing operational and technological support. The thing is not to deal with it in sections, but rather as a whole. The review of information management and records production processes to provide reusable quality data and content opens up a range of business opportunities. Current budget restrictions must serve to raise the bar in terms of excellence of records management solutions contracted and external personnel undertaking their development alongside the agency's archiving staff.

In order to know what is in the back office, you need appropriate descriptive instruments, to apply conservation schedules in compliance with current legislation, apply a quick, solvent access regime, powerful audit trail systems, be up to date in the ordering and identification of the records produced and have analogue and digital repositories with sound security and business continuity management systems. All this requires a continuous and, above all, measured strategy. Measured means efficient budget management, understanding that the organisation's comprehensive view requires experience and finding the right balance between internal resources and external needs. Investment must be in technology, but above all on adequate knowledge of the internal workings of the Administration, on the comprehensive view, knowledge of records and the capacity to manage large volumes of data, information and records.

Furthermore, warning should be given that technology applied to good management of large volumes of data in digital environments forgets that we still have large volumes of gross data in analogue media in the 'pantry'. Despite the digital push, government agencies remain hybrid, in the sense that they continue to manage paper and digital records together. Considering only the bits is reductionist. It leaves out a huge amount of gross data, all of which can be digitised, that seemingly has no value because of its medium. All information has value, and increasingly so, regardless of the medium. We must be wary of overly disruptive models that play to the gallery when the tangible reality is very different.

The proactive attitude to having quality records management systems in organisations should be assessed as a criterion of good governance. In this respect, the 2004 report *Tools to Support Transparency in Local Governance*, published by Transparency International and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, warned at the time that access to information is often overly restricted by poor organisation in records management in organisations. The report understood as a factor favouring transparency the publication of document series produced and managed to facilitate ordered, guided access to government information and to foster the rendering of accounts, thoroughness and professionalism of management systems. These tools, still valid in 2013, are part of the Corruption Fighters' Toolkits from Transparency International. Thus its importance speaks for itself. And is it not enough to simply organise the back office. We must also be transparent and explain the work being done, show the public that the information and documents that lend it credibility and probative value are not the result of spontaneous action, but of proven policies and methods.

Legislation on Transparency and Access to Public Information and Good Governance should be the final spur for a truly productive, effective and efficient reorganisation of the processes of drawing up documents in our government agencies. A spur that must

also enable a new door to open on business opportunities in this process of continuous improvement and quest for excellence.