* 7TH WEEK

INFORMATION POLICY

Some examples include providing accurate information, producing and maintaining information that meets the specific needs of the public, protecting the privacy and confidentiality of personal and sensitive information, and making informed decisions on which information should be disseminated and how to distribute it effectively, among others

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.

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

LEVELS OF INFORMATION POLICY

Infrastructural Policies

Apply across society and affect the information sector both directly and indirectly

Horizontal Information Policy

Apply across society and affect the information Sector both directly and indirectly

**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.

**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

• Inconsistency 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.