

## "Corporate Records and Archives References Services: challenges and opportunities from the Bank of Uganda perspective"

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### **Abstract:**

It is best practice for most corporate organizations to massively create or receive official records, process, offer storage, conduct search and retrieval while conducting official business. Such organisations are duty bound to critically assess the likely opportunities and challenges that affect the dissemination of information through reference services as a core business activity. The Bank of Uganda being the banker of Government business receives and processes all financial instruments relating to payments of Government transactions. As a result, authentic copies of the records are always retained at the Bank storage facilities. The registries, Bank Archives and the Board Security Registry take charge of all the records deemed to be of enduring value and highly confidential in nature. Patrons request such information in order to attend to probes as arise. A higher percentage of requests received are positively attended to but, there are scenarios where a patron's needs are not satisfied. It is normally due to inaccurate search parameters provided by the patrons and this poses a great challenge to providing efficient information reference service. The Bank of Uganda (BOU) information resource centres include the Bank Archives, the Knowledge Management Centre (KMC), The Kikonyogo Money Museum, and the numerous departmental registries. While performing their core duties they engage in reference services to assist information seekers access the required information through conducting reference interviews in an effort to understand the users' needs and so serve them better.

**Keywords:** *Reference Services, reference interviews, Archives, Records, and the Bank of Uganda.*

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## **About the Bank of Uganda:**

The Bank of Uganda (BOU) is the central bank of the Republic of Uganda established in 1966, by an Act of Parliament. BOU is 100% owned by the Government of Uganda. The Board of Directors of the Bank of Uganda is the supreme policy making body of the Bank. It is chaired by the Governor and in his absence by the Deputy Governor. In the process of fulfilling the Bank's mission "To foster price stability and a sound financial system" and vision "To be a centre of excellence in upholding macroeconomic stability", the Bank carries out the following functions: Issue Uganda's national currency/legal tender, the Uganda Shilling (UGX), act as banker to the Government of Uganda, supervise and regulate financial institutions in Uganda, manage the country's external/foreign reserves and; the country's external debt: *According to the Bank of Uganda Act 1966.*

## **The Birth of Reference Service:**

Reference service as we know it today is a direct outgrowth of the nineteenth-century American Public Education Movement (Garrison, 1979). Before universal public education, the vast majority of the American public was illiterate; libraries only benefited the elite minority. Before the 1850s, libraries were limited to colleges, government, and subscription libraries that served small segments of the entire community. During the late nineteenth century, the relationship of the library to the community changed significantly. The primary goal of the public education movement was to produce a literate working class. Employers felt that a literate workforce would be more productive on the job; but literacy would also create a better society for those employees off the job. One direct consequence of the public education movement was the development of true "public" libraries. Unlike subscription libraries, which were open only to paying members, the new public libraries were available to everyone. Communities that established public libraries were often surprised at how well they were received. Not only did the elite utilize the library but many of the formerly marginalized working class took advantage of their new education. There was however one problem, they did not know how to use the library.

The beginning of reference service is generally attributed to Samuel Swett Green, who in 1876 published the first article on helping patrons use the library. While it is doubtful that Green actually invented the idea of reference service for library users, he was the first to speak publicly about the concept and the first to discuss it in writing. In his speech to the first meeting of the American Library Association and his *Library Journal* article, Green discussed the need for librarians to actively assist members of their communities in using library resources. While the term "reference" did not evolve until several decades later (Rothstein, 1953), the publication of Green's article helped to popularize the new concept of reference service.

## **Historical trends of reference service in the Bank:**

In the late 1990s, Bank of Uganda was faced with a challenge of improper records management practices which constituted improper filing, improper classification of

record series, stacking of records in sacks, preserving records in acidic archives boxes, and dumping unsorted records in basements. This created an uncontrolled situation which reduced the security levels of records. It also made timely search and retrieval of information extremely hard since most records were stacked in sacks and not classified. This situation led to numerous emergency Executive Management meetings to address those challenges and eventually it was decided to procure an Electronic Document Management System (EDMS) to support the digitisation of all records in the Bank. *According to the Archives Section Framework Report 2007;*

A Document Conversion and Retrieval Services (DCRS) project was adopted and this has helped clear all the back-log and overturn the previous state of records management in the Bank. All archival documents dating from way back to 1916s during the colonial administrative times were digitized and can be accessed online through *virtual reference service*.

The Bank maintains its records in various formats i.e., Hard copies are stored in acid-free archives boxes and are kept away at the off-site storage repository on open-shelves. Records in transit are stored in the on-site high density mobile shelves. Records with litigation value are further processed into Microform format as they can be used as a substitute of the original copy. Highly *classified* administrative records like the Board Minutes and resolutions in the current form are maintained in a security registry in both soft and hard copies. This registry serves clients at the level of senior management.

The Library operated as the Knowledge Management Centre (KMC) offers library resources and services to both staff members and the general public who wish to conduct research based on economy and monetary practises.

The various internal legal policy frameworks like the Document Management Policy 2013 and the Document Management Guidelines 2005 are also in place to offer direction to proper records management. These lay out clear procedures of how to request and access information thus making reference service more efficient and productive as a business unit in the Bank.

#### **Key drivers to successful reference service:**

There are several factors that have influenced successful operations of reference service at the Bank of Uganda. These include organisational values like confidentiality, Transparency and teamwork, Adherence to standard reference service practises and values, fostering the reference service business process, monitoring and evaluation of the business process, effective operational policies and procedures.

Engaging the local community through organizing communication and outreach open days has led to the effective marketing of information management in the Bank. Annually, the Bank Archives hold the *archives week* and also celebrates the International Archives day to create awareness about the services offered, information in its custody and how to access it. The Knowledge Management Centre (KMC) markets its information resources in the Annual Trade Show Fair. The Kikonyogo Money Museum also hosts the general public, Students at all academic levels and

families of staff members. This is all intended to create awareness and outreach about the information and services offered by the various BOU information centres.

Information officers regularly and systematically evaluate the effectiveness of marketing of reference and information services. It is through conducting in-house knowledge sharing sessions and training sessions to gather feedback from reference librarians, archivists and museum curators regarding the success of the reference services. This is conducted through engaging users in focus groups, conducting evaluation surveys as a user follow-up for reaction and perception of reference services: *According to Bank of Uganda Administration Manual 2011.*

Internal information and communication systems specifically: the Bank Archives setup an electronic group mailing platform ([Archivesinfo@bou.or.ug](mailto:Archivesinfo@bou.or.ug)) accessible to all staff through which internal reference service requests are directed to the Bank Archives for processing and then permission to search information is granted. Search status responses are normally channelled electronically and all line supervisors are copied in for purposes of audit-trailing and accountability. In the Bank of Uganda by Law, the Governor is the Chief Information Officer. All information requests from outside the Bank must be channelled through the Chief Information Officer in order to obtain authorization and the release of information outside the Bank. *According to the Access to Information Act 2005.*

Right of information access: *Every citizen has a right of access to information and records in the possession of the State or any public body, except where the release of the information is likely to prejudice the security or sovereignty of the State or interfere with the right to the privacy of any other person. According to Constitution of Uganda article 41.* This act is used to guide reference officers while serving the interests of information seekers. It eliminates denial of information to patrons with interest of access. Internal Bank of Uganda Records Management Policies: the Bank has numerous policies relating to accessioning, processing, storage and dissemination of records: The Document Management Policy 2013 (DMP) and the Document Management Guidelines (DMG) 2006 were also enacted in order to support the effective control and dissemination of information whenever required.

Internal support from the Bank management has been positive in upholding records management as a core business process. It has financially supported the automation of the Bank Archives through the acquisition of the Document Conversion and Retrieval system (DCRS) and the Knowledge Management Centre (KMC) and this has led to the timely search and retrieval of information whenever a reference query is received. There has been continuous benchmarking and training of staff in proper records management, equipping them with skills in effective information delivery.

#### **Opportunities of corporate reference service:**

Reference service has enabled the Bank of Uganda to market its corporate image to other corporate organizations, Government Departments, Agencies, scholars, educational institutions, and researchers. This has led to branding BOU as a centre of excellence in information management.

Corporate reference service in the Bank has promoted research, policy review and publication. Policy makers at strategic levels of management have always made reference and quote of previous documentations. This supports review of policies, and also generation of new working documentation used for administrative purposes.

Excellence in information management: the introduction of Virtual Reference Service initiated electronically, often in real-time, where patrons employ computers or other Internet Technologies to communicate with reference staff without being physically present. Communication channels used frequently in virtual reference include online chats, videoconferencing, e-mailing, and instant messaging. Decentralization of virtual reference services across departments has also created efficiency in operations since it reduces unwanted delays which hinder quick and effective decision making process.

The Bank has always supported numerous commissions of inquiries in other government agencies and it is through this positive response that its image is upheld. BOU has also on numerous occasions been praised by other departments of government as being the entity that has fought against corruption and embezzlement tendencies since it has been providing all information whenever there is a query. Furthermore, the Bank has been able to win numerous legal suits against it in courts of law simply because it has been able to provide all relevant documentation required to defend its cases during legal proceedings.

Relationship bonding has been achieved through reference service where records personnel have been able to bond with other stake holders who seek information and this has created a positive collaborative knowledge sharing relationship.

Training and benchmarking opportunities are offered to patrons from other countries, other Central Banks in the region like Central Bank of South Sudan (BSS), Bank of Tanzania (BOT), Bank of Burundi, and the Central Bank of Kenya (CBK) to mention a few. Other government bodies, the Uganda Revenue Authority (URA) staff, the Uganda Registration Services Bureau (URSB) staff and the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) officers have all been trained in effective reference service management.

In most corporate, Private sector and Government Institutions like Bank of Uganda, reference service as a business process supports cross referencing that promotes effective, informative and balanced decision making where a fair judgment needs to be taken into account. BOU senior management has always made reference to archival information in order to make reviews or enact new organisational policies.

#### **Challenges of corporate reference service:**

Bureaucratic tendencies experienced in accessing information by external patrons also create a slow process of reference service. Since all external requests must go through the Governor's office, the Chief Information Officer, this slows down the process in instances where the Governor is unavailable to append his signature on the request.

Technological obsolescence of hardware and software is also costly, and calls for an extra expense where the Bank must persistently upgrade its systems software, acquire advanced hardware and train its employees against new types of possible attacks and threats on the new information systems.

Provision of inaccurate search parameters by patrons during the course of requesting for information hinders timely and accurate retrieval of information thus making the search unproductive. Due to lack of basic records management knowledge or limited interest in information management, many information seekers lack the most suitable way of seeking for information to satisfy their need and therefore end up failing to formally state exactly what they need. This eventually leads to low satisfaction on the patron's side and also in efficiency on the service provider's performance. This vice has been addressed by conducting regular training, monitoring and evaluation sessions to all staff in order to enhance awareness of proper records management.

For example, the introduction of modern technology in form of *virtual reference service* also has drawbacks. An (EDMS), e-mails, video conferencing's failure due to limited internet connectivity or system break down also pose a great challenge to information requests. This slows down the process of receiving and delivery of information. Therefore, clients' interests will not be satisfied in a timely manner.

Limited knowledge and awareness about proper records management procedures as a major business unit is still lacking in most government departments. This leads to poor records management practices like misfiling and improper indexing which in turn makes reference service a hard task to conduct. This is due to the fact that most people have not yet appreciated and also embraced information management as a core business process.

Social factors and users' biases about Archives and libraries all contribute to challenges faced when conducting reference service. Shame, shyness, and anxiety can prevent a user from approaching the reference desk. Uneven signposting and explanation of services can mean that some information seekers are not aware that the reference service exists and this limits effective dissemination of information.

Unnecessary security guarding of record series has also led to censoring of information and this in turn limits access to certain information sources. This leads to delays in execution of strategies and decision making.

Fear of personal accountability is a challenge to reference service; such circumstances are common where patrons request for information but are hesitant to acknowledge receipt of the retrieved records. This jeopardizes records transparency and auditing values of records management.

In some instances, patrons normally borrow records, text books, journals, artefacts from the different information centres and fail to honour the terms and conditions agreed upon when borrowing the information source. This leads to loss of items and also limits knowledge transfer and sharing since other users cannot have access to the same information source: *According to the Bank of Uganda internal newsletters 2014.*

*As a way of mitigating drawbacks in effective reference servicing, information managers and providers should continuously engage in policy awareness so that patrons can be in position to know how to access information from the different information centres, budget for technological trends, hold continuous proper records management training and sensitization amongst stakeholders, Delegate responsibilities or powers in order to reduce on delays in dissemination of information, levy charges on patrons who either delay or loss information resources. In addition, it is better to widely sensitize users about the "Dos and Don'ts "of a library setup. Maintain traceable audit trails for accountability purposes and also outsource more than one internet service provider to mitigate unreliable internet connections.*

In conclusion, the author offers a few suggestions and recommendations to reference librarians and archivists who are engaged in information client needs satisfaction. There is a need to be proactive when dealing with technological trends: for example, this will involve preceding financial budgeting and constant research in ICTs. Engaging in extensive reference interviewing so as to broadly understand the client's information needs; this can be achieved through giving information seekers reasonable service time in order to eliminate social discomfort and bias about Libraries.

The breakdown on the high levels of bureaucratic tendencies can be achieved through decentralising power of authority to different levels of governance. Continuous marketing of reference services can lead to effective dissemination of information in corporate organisations. Secondly, for effective corporate reference service to be accomplished, Libraries, Museums and Archives also need to embrace virtual reference service as opposed to the traditional code of reference service. This can be achieved through transforming information resources into electronic versions so that online requisitioning and dissemination of information is possible, timely and accurate in nature. Thirdly, information providers should also continuously engage in policy awareness so that patrons can be in position to know how to access information from the different information centres. This all combined can increase the opportunities and reduce the challenges associated with corporate information reference services.

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