In the Field

Flexibility and Adaptability: My Experience in Government Information Management

The public often associates the government with having a reputation of being slow in adapting to and implementing change. Standards, directives, and policies are developed by regulatory bodies such as the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (TBS), and they are then handed to departments with strict deliverables and timelines. Changes in policy can have significant impacts on government departments, forcing them to redirect resources to adapt to these changes. Information Management (IM) teams often face barriers in implementing change because they are typically small in number, and IM activities are often widely distributed within a department. After having the opportunity to work as an IM Analyst at the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario (FedDev Ontario), which is a small federal department, I now understand how flexible and adaptable information professionals must be.

Having never worked with the federal government prior to my eight-month placement with FedDev Ontario, I started the position unsure of what to expect. Although I had taken the Information Management course in Western University's Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) program and done my research on the department, I was still uncertain of what my position would be and how I would fit within the larger organization. Prior to beginning my job, I told family and friends that I would be taking on a co-op position at FedDev as an IM Analyst. They seemed impressed, but I found it challenging to explain what my role would entail. For the most

part, I summed it up based on my expectations as “a research-type position.” Now, however, I can say that while conducting research is important to my position, it is not the central aspect of my job.

During my second week at the department, I met with the IM team, consisting of the Information Management Officer (my supervisor), the IM/IT Manager, and the other IM Analyst co-op student. The IM/IT Manager immediately told us that our team’s new focus for the fiscal year would be open government, as this was the new IM priority passed down by TBS. This announcement led to some confusion on my supervisor’s part because previous fiscal years had been heavily focused on recordkeeping and ensuring that the standards in recordkeeping were consistent across government. As a young department at FedDev Ontario, this change meant that we would need to develop new policies, guidelines, and documentation, with only the department’s existing documentation to serve as a guide. Given that these changes were coupled with short turnaround times, I can now understand my supervisor’s confusion. A large amount of time had been previously invested in the recordkeeping project, but it seemed that TBS shifted their priorities away from recordkeeping. We needed to move quickly to ensure that our department would be able to demonstrate its compliance with the new priority at the end of the fiscal year.

As a member of a small IM team of four people charged with supporting the information and records needs of a department of about 250 employees, all while rapidly redirecting our priorities in accordance with TBS, I learned firsthand the adaptability and flexibility required of information professionals. Had we been a larger team, our priorities and tasks would have been divided and delegated to smaller teams.

Under those circumstances, numerous decision-making meetings would have taken place to prepare policy documentation. Therefore, the advantage of having such a small team was our ability to quickly put the required documentation together and move it through the approval process with minimal administrative barriers.

Working as part of a small team in a small department can be challenging, as you are often expected to stop working on certain projects to focus on others that have been identified as a priority. Similarly, when a client approaches you with a request, it is necessary to stop your current project and address the client's needs so they can continue their work. This is why IM processes in the government can often take time. Working on a small IM team can also be rewarding; learning and contributing towards a range of IM activities and services has allowed me to grow as an information professional more than I could have imagined. While the department is not of the same scale as the Canada Revenue Agency or Veterans Affairs, our small size allows the IM team to be innovative in our work. We have opportunities to be involved in a wide breadth of IM projects, which would perhaps not be the case if we were a larger IM team within a larger department. Through this experience, I have gained an understanding of how important it is for information professionals to be flexible and adaptable in their work in order to keep up with the demands assigned by regulatory bodies.

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