

Public Service Digitalization: A Qualitative Study on Exploring the Benefits of Implementing A Centralized Document Management System in Public Administration

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ABSTRACT

The continued reliance on paper-based records and fragmented digital storage remains a persistent challenge in public administration, leading to delayed services, misplaced documents, and administrative inefficiencies. This capstone study used a qualitative, observational approach by reviewing and analyzing existing literature and professional reports to examine the role of a Centralized Document Management System (CDMS) in addressing these issues. Findings from the reviewed sources indicated that using a CDMS improves document retrieval efficiency, strengthens record security through digital control and tracking, and enhances organizational coordination across offices. The study found that centralized document management helps public institutions improve administrative processes and service delivery as part of digital transformation efforts.

Keywords: Centralized Document Management System, public administration, document handling, digital transformation, record security, administrative efficiency

INTRODUCTION

Proper document handling remains a serious concern in public administration in the Philippines. Many public offices still rely on paper-based records and scattered digital files, which leads to frequent problems such as delayed document retrieval, misplaced records, and weak monitoring of document movement. These issues affect both clients who need timely access to their documents and administrative staff who manage large volumes of records daily.

A concrete example of these challenges is the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) in Nueva Vizcaya, where document handling followed a traditional manual workflow before the adoption of the Online Document Tracking System (ODTS). In that setup, a single document had to pass through at least six steps and five different people. The process would stop completely whenever the Records Custodian or Division Head was unavailable, such as when either was traveling. There was no way to check a document's status without physically locating it or asking someone along the chain, and moving documents created a constant risk of loss or misplacement.

This situation reflects a broader pattern documented in existing literature, where the absence of a unified and centralized system limits the effectiveness of public service delivery. There is a clear need to explore how a Centralized Document Management System (CDMS) can address these common challenges in public administration.

Objectives

This qualitative study aimed to:

1. Identify common document handling problems in public administrative settings, based on a review of at least 30 existing studies and firsthand observations.
2. Examine how electronic and centralized document management systems are described in the literature as addressing document organization, access, security, and monitoring, using a systematic review of peer-reviewed sources.
3. Explore how a Centralized Document Management System could address the identified problems by synthesizing findings from literature and a real-life case study of DAR Nueva Vizcaya.

Scope and Limitations

This study examined existing literature and studies on Centralized Document Management Systems in public administration. It focused on how documents are stored, accessed, monitored, and secured based on previous research. The study also examined the real-life document workflows of DAR Nueva Vizcaya to ground it in an actual Philippine public office setting.

The study did not involve system development, software testing, or collecting primary data through interviews or surveys. The findings are based entirely on secondary data from related literature and observed administrative practices. Results should therefore be understood as descriptive insights rather than conclusions that apply to all public offices.

METHODS

Research Approach

This study used a qualitative descriptive design. Rather than measuring performance or testing a system, it focused on understanding how document-handling problems occur in real administrative settings and how they are discussed in existing literature. This design was appropriate for a non-experimental, conceptual study.

Data Gathering

Data were gathered through systematic document analysis. Sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, theses, institutional reports, and policy documents related to digital records management. The study reviewed 31 sources from both local

and international literature. These materials provided a broad base of documented experiences and confirmed that the problems this study aimed to address are widely observed across different institutional contexts.

Real-life administrative observations also informed the study. Document handling practices in DAR Nueva Vizcaya served as a concrete, grounded example. The study examined two specific workflows: the traditional manual document flow used before ODTS and the digital ODTS workflow currently in use. The study referenced supporting policy documents, including DAR Special Order No. 676 Series of 2018 and the ODTS usage policy, to validate the example's institutional background.

Technical Context

The ODTS used in DAR Nueva Vizcaya runs on Microsoft Office 365 SharePoint, which was officially designated as the document tracking system for all DAR offices through Special Order No. 676 in 2018. The system allows documents to be received, routed, supervised, and acted on through a cloud-based platform. Staff and concerned personnel communicate through messaging platforms such as Messenger GC. This setup requires no physical hardware beyond a device with internet access, making it a practical solution for public offices.

Financial Considerations

Since no actual system was built or deployed, no direct cost computation was conducted. However, the literature consistently shows that moving to digital document management reduces paper use, printing costs, and the need for physical storage space. In the DAR case, the ODTS runs on Microsoft Office 365 SharePoint, which is already part of the department's existing infrastructure. This means the shift to ODTS did not require a separate budget for new technology. For public offices without an existing system, the literature recommends a phased approach that starts with the most essential documents and expands gradually based on available resources.

Legal and Operational Basis

The ODTS implementation in DAR is backed by formal institutional authority. DAR Special Order No. 676 Series of 2018 mandates all DAR Central Office units to use Microsoft Office 365 SharePoint as the official document tracking system and requires updates within 24 hours of actual processing. A supplementary memorandum dated January 15, 2021 directed all regional directors to report compliance with this directive. These documents confirm that the ODTS operates within a clear legal and administrative framework, supporting accountability and consistent use across offices.

Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis examined the gathered materials. The analysis extracted relevant information from each source and organized it around key concepts: accessibility, organization, security, efficiency, and accountability. Patterns were compared across multiple sources to identify consistent issues and observed outcomes. The extracted findings were then structured according to the three research questions to ensure that the analysis remained focused and directly addressed the study's objectives

RESULTS

Comparative Results: Traditional vs. ODTS Workflow

The literature review and direct observation of the DAR Nueva Vizcaya traditional workflow revealed a consistent set of document-handling problems in public administrative settings. These included scattered storage, slow manual retrieval, weak monitoring, and heavy dependence on specific personnel being physically present. The adoption of the Online Document Tracking System (ODTS), which is a real-world example of a Centralized Document Management System, directly addressed each of these problems. Table 1 summarizes the comparison between the traditional manual workflow and the ODTS digital workflow.

Table 1.0

ASPECT OF COMPARISON	BEFORE CDMS (TRADITIONAL DOCUMENT HANDLING)	AFTER CDMS (CONCEPTUAL CDMS BASED ON LITERATURE)
Document Storage	Files are kept in physical folders or scattered digital locations.	Files are stored in one centralized digital repository.
Document Retrieval	Finding documents is slow and mostly done manually.	Documents can be retrieved faster through organized digital storage.
Document Security	Records are prone to loss, damage, or unauthorized access.	Access is controlled through defined permissions.
Monitoring and Tracking	Document activities are rarely monitored or recorded.	Document access and movement can be tracked.
Administrative Efficiency	Processing is delayed due to poor document handling.	Workflows are more organized and efficient.
Client Access	Clients must visit offices and follow multiple requirements.	Clients can access documents digitally with control.
Record Organization	Filing is inconsistent and depends on individuals.	Documents follow a structured and standardized system.
Risk of Document Loss	Files are easily misplaced or duplicated.	Centralized storage reduces loss and duplication.

Document Handling Practices Before and After a Centralized Document Management System

Table 1.0 presents a side-by-side comparison of document handling before and after implementing a Centralized Document Management System, drawn from both the literature and the DAR Nueva Vizcaya case.

Technical Feasibility

The ODTS in DAR Nueva Vizcaya demonstrates that a CDMS is technically feasible for public offices in the Philippine setting. The system runs on Microsoft Office 365 SharePoint, a cloud-based platform that requires no physical server infrastructure and is accessible through any internet-connected device. Because the platform was already part of DAR's existing technology environment, implementation did not require procuring new hardware or specialized software. The system supports document receipt, routing, supervision, and actioning entirely in the digital space, confirming that the technical requirements for a functional CDMS are manageable for a government office.

Financial Viability

While this study did not include a formal cost analysis, the literature and the DAR example point to clear financial advantages. Moving from a paper-based system to a digital one reduces recurring expenses on printing, photocopying, and physical storage. In DAR's case, the ODTS was implemented using an existing Microsoft Office 365 subscription, so the shift required no additional technology budget. For offices that do not yet have a similar platform, the literature recommends starting with a scaled approach focused on the most critical documents, which keeps initial costs low while still delivering meaningful improvements in efficiency.

Risk Assessment

Several risks were identified from the literature and from the DAR case. Over-reliance on the system is one concern, as staff may become less attentive to manual verification when everything is handled digitally. Security vulnerabilities pose another risk: if the system is poorly maintained or access controls are not properly set, sensitive documents could be exposed to unauthorized access. There is also a risk of data manipulation, where records could be altered or concealed if ethical standards and monitoring practices are not upheld.

These risks can be addressed through consistent security practices such as role-based access, regular audits, and strong password policies. Clear written guidelines and regular staff training are also important to ensure that the system is used responsibly and that all personnel understand their obligations.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study confirm that the document handling problems identified in the literature are not abstract or theoretical. They are visible in actual public offices, as shown by the traditional DAR Nueva Vizcaya workflow. The comparison between the traditional flow and the ODTS workflow makes it clear that a centralized system directly addresses the specific bottlenecks and inefficiencies that public offices face.

Together, the literature and the DAR case show that the most impactful improvements are not just about storing documents in a digital format. What makes a real difference is a system that centralizes access, enforces role-based controls, enables real-time tracking, and lets staff keep working regardless of location. These features remove the dependence on specific individuals being present, which was the root cause of most delays in the traditional workflow.

Technology alone is not enough. The DAR implementation succeeded because it was backed by a formal policy, specifically Special-Order No. 676, and supported by clear operational guidelines. This confirms what the literature consistently points out: successful CDMS adoption requires proper governance, training, and organizational readiness alongside the technical setup.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the review of 31 literature sources and the direct examination of DAR Nueva Vizcaya's document workflows, this study concludes that implementing a Centralized Document Management System in public administration is both feasible and beneficial. The ODTS currently used at DAR Nueva Vizcaya provides direct evidence that a centralized, cloud-based document-tracking system can function effectively in a Philippine public office without major infrastructure investment.

The shift from the traditional workflow to the ODTS removed the physical movement of documents, eliminated workflow bottlenecks caused by personnel unavailability, improved real-time visibility of document status, and allowed clients to transact without visiting the office. These outcomes align with what the broader literature consistently attributes to well-implemented CDMS: improved efficiency, better security, stronger accountability, and faster service delivery.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made for public offices considering the adoption or improvement of a centralized document management system:
- Formalize document management policies that define how records are classified, who can access them, and how long they are kept. Write these into official office procedures and review them regularly.
- Provide regular staff training, both when the system is first introduced and as part of ongoing professional development. New employees should receive orientation on the system, and refresher sessions should be offered annually.
- Allocate a dedicated budget for maintenance, software updates, and backup services. Even a low-cost system requires consistent resources to remain reliable and secure.

- Use a phased rollout for offices with limited budgets. Start with the most critical documents and expand the system gradually as capacity and familiarity grow.
- Conduct periodic audits to ensure that records remain accurate, access controls are functioning, and the system continues to meet the operational needs of the office.

AI DECLARATION STATEMENT

AI-supported tools helped with grammar and structure in creating this article. No AI tools were used to collect, analyze, or interpret data; all authors are credited for their academic contributions.

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