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## Internal Oversight Service Audit Section

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# Audit of the Correspondence Management System and Related Process

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Key results

Correspondence management is an important component of an Organization's communication process. At UNESCO, correspondence covers memorandums, emails, letters and faxes, and helps the Organization communicate to its various stakeholders as well as contribute to its credibility, relevance and efficient delivery.

The Office of the Director General oversees correspondence including those addressed to the Director-General and the Deputy Director-General. This critical process is supported by a SharePoint based Correspondence Management (CM) system accessible at Headquarters and in UNESCO field units. Over the years, the system has not been upgraded to meet user requirements and its performance has significantly degraded due to technical deficiencies.

The decision to upgrade the CM system has been delayed mainly due to lack of funding and low prioritization vis-a-vis competing projects. As a result, despite willingness to use the system, technical deficiencies have led to substantial loss of staff time, delayed correspondence handling and exposure to information security risks.

Discrepancies in administrative guidance and lack of training in correspondence management prevail. Users are not fully aware of their responsibilities and lack skills to use the CM system. Consequently, the CM system data is incomplete and the quality of its reports is impaired.

### Background and scope

1. Correspondence management at UNESCO covers receiving, recording, processing and responding to incoming and outgoing correspondence (via memorandums, emails, letters and faxes). Administrative Manual items 9.17 provides the rules and procedures for handling the official correspondence of the Organization. Further, the UNESCO Correspondence Manual (1999) sets out the guidelines for drafting, presentation, submission and dispatch of correspondence.

2. A critical component of correspondence management is the official correspondence addressed to the Director-General and the Deputy Director-General. The Office of the Director-General (ODG) oversees this process using a SharePoint based Correspondence Management system (CM) that was launched in 2009 to support the following functions:

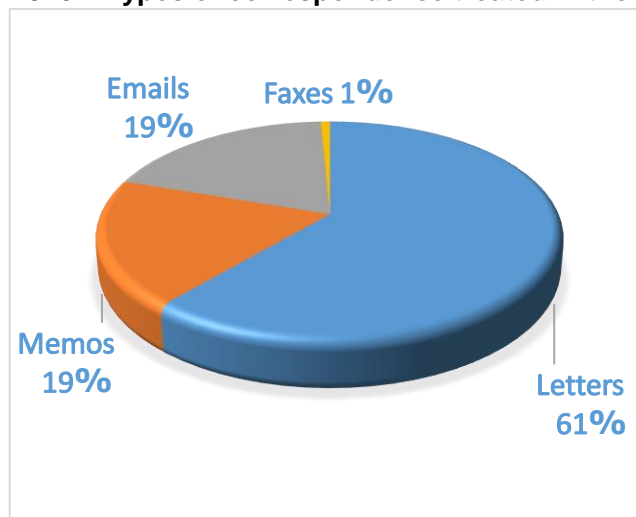
- Registration
- Attribution
- Visas
- Tracking
- Centralization

3. Since its inception, the CM system has handled 86,975 official correspondence and served 1,411<sup>1</sup> users. Figure 1 below summarizes types of correspondence recorded in the CM system during 2016.

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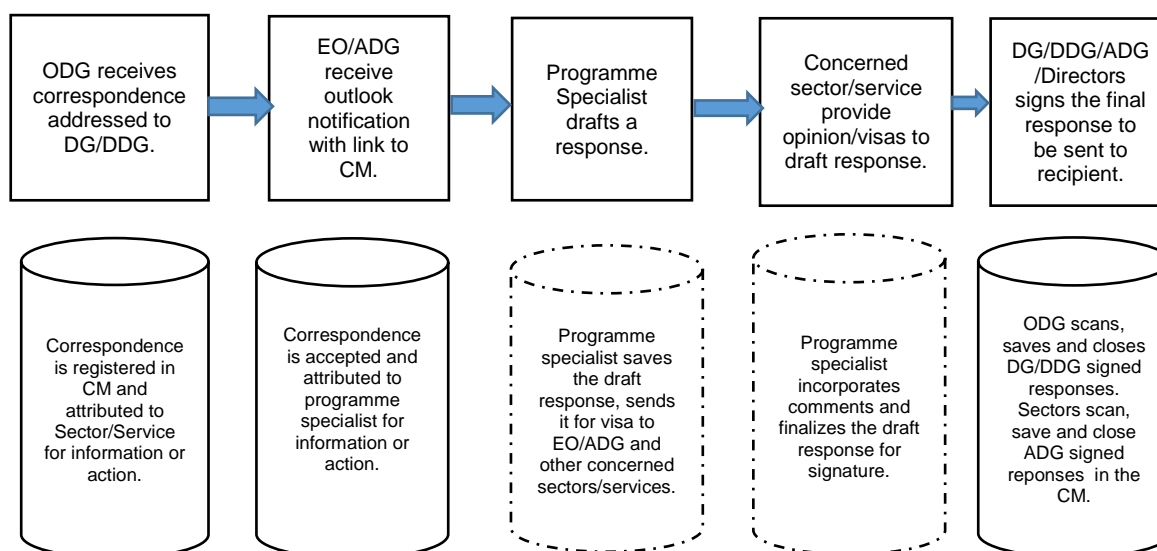
<sup>1</sup> As provided by KMI in December 2016

**Figure 1: 2016 – Types of correspondence treated in the CM system**



4. The Official correspondence management process is mapped below in figure 2:

**Figure 2: Official correspondence management process**



5. As indicated above, the CM system plays a central role in tracking the official correspondence status. However, the gradual degradation in the system’s performance, data inaccuracies and lack of user participation has resulted in inefficient handling of correspondence. Given its corporate significance, ODG requested IOS to conduct an audit on the efficient and effective use of the CM system.

**Scope, Objective and Methodology**

6. IOS assessed the implementation of the correspondence management process and usage of the CM system with a view to improve the handling of correspondence, including accountability for its management and appropriateness of the tools. The engagement was performed in accordance with the *International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing*. The assessment methodology included:

- Review of correspondence management workflow and assessment of controls,
- Analysis of a 22 percent sample of 400 open correspondence in ODG (1), ED (13), SC (14), CLT (11), CI (8), SHS (5) and ERI (34),

- Interviews with the application administrator and key users in ODG, Programme Sectors, ERI, BFM, Montevideo, Dakar, and Bangkok Field Offices on the correspondence management process and use of the CM system,
- Review of software documentation to understand the CM system functionalities,
- Review of statistical reports on processed and pending correspondence,
- Gap analysis between the current system and user expectations,
- Analysis of existing performance issues, technical problems and assessment of options to remediate deficiencies using the services of a certified SharePoint expert.

## **Achievements**

7. The SharePoint CM system established in 2009, facilitates the management of correspondence and contributes to the Organization's responsiveness, overall credibility and relevance.

8. ODG regularly monitors correspondence pending final actions and emphasizes on importance of timely responses to correspondence. Despite the deficiencies in the CM system, this follow-up action is a mitigating factor for reducing the number of outstanding correspondence and the response delays.

9. The SharePoint CM system developed by ALTI in 2009 is supported by understandable programme code and documented business logic.

## **Challenges**

10. Since its introduction in 2009, the CM system's performance has gradually degraded. This has largely contributed to delayed processing and declined number of correspondence handled in the CM system.

11. One major contributor to the slow performance of CM system is the malfunctioning of its archiving feature since 2011. Without this feature, the volume of correspondence in the active database has increased thereby progressively lowering the system's performance. A second hindering factor affecting the system performance lies in its suboptimal design i.e. history logs and correspondence permissions are accessed when each transaction is performed. Using an independent expert, IOS determined that a minimal investment would remediate the above situation.

12. At Headquarters, the status of a significant amount (53 percent<sup>2</sup>) of correspondence is incorrectly tracked. Users responding to an IOS survey indicate that while there is a willingness to use the system, various limitations impair its usage. For example, users noted that:

- the system is slow and heavy to process correspondence actions,
- unlike modern SharePoint systems, the CM system's search function is dependent on metadata e.g., registry number, town, country, subject, keywords, and does not use full-text facilities,
- correspondence handling is sequential and cannot be prioritized based on urgency,
- duplicate or misclassified data records make the tracking and monitoring of correspondence unreliable,
- individual correspondence closing procedures are lengthy,
- confidentiality of data in the system cannot be ascertained.

13. The above deficiencies have remained unaddressed over several years and have resulted in significant loss of staff time and delayed correspondence handling. The lack of corporate

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<sup>2</sup> IOS sample review of 86 correspondence during 2016. Twenty one percent of correspondence replied through other means and 32 percent did not require any action e.g., letters for information.

initiative to address the system deficiencies raises questions on prioritization of IT investments to meet the Organization’s critical needs and indicates weak IT governance processes.

14. Other areas of improvement include the need for clarity in correspondence guidance. For example, the scope of official correspondence and steps to handle correspondence differ in the administrative guidance and the CM system workflow. Further, after ODG assigns a correspondence, handling processes in the sectors need to be clarified for improving transparency on the status of a correspondence.

15. Finally, with lack of training in the recent years, users’ accountability and awareness on correspondence management and the CM system are low. Some users respond to correspondence outside the system and do not necessarily update the correspondence status in the CM system. As a result, the CM system reports are inaccurate. Similarly, a large number of UNESCO Field Offices staff are not aware of their responsibilities to use the CM system. Consequently, a substantive volume of correspondence is treated outside the CM system and Headquarters is not always informed of the interaction between Field Offices with their national counterparts.

**Table of recommendations**

<p><b>Recommendation 1:</b> KMI in consultation with ODG, to:</p> <p>(1) establish a project with defined short term timeline and resources to: deploy an IT platform for efficient and effective management of official correspondence and</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- efficiently migrate the relevant existing data to such system</li></ul> <p>(2) inform the Knowledge and Information Technology Management Advisory Board on progress of the project.</p> <p><b>Recommendation 2:</b> ODG to:</p> <p>(1) Clarify administrative guidance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Sectors/Services to draft, visa, clear and finalize all correspondence using the system,</li><li>- Interim responses are made to correspondence requiring lengthy considerations and that such correspondence are closed in the system,</li><li>- Categorization of correspondence according to their importance in CM system and specify this information in administrative manual,</li><li>- Review and appropriately link response templates (hosted under Resources on the Intranet) for common correspondence to the CM system,</li></ul> <p>(2) Align correspondence management system workflow and administrative manual item 9.17,</p> <p>(3) Ensure adequate training on the correspondence management process.</p> <p><b>Recommendation 3:</b> ODG as the business owner of the correspondence process, to review and provide appropriate administrative rights to create, access, change status and/or delete a correspondence. Further, ODG to grant Sector Correspondence Focal Points, authorization to delegate access to CM system within their respective Sector upon validation of EO.</p>
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