

Chapter II

Quick Movement of Files

Quick Movement of Files

Since the efficiency of the government depends on quick movement of files, the Assam Administrative Reforms Commission makes the following recommendations for improving the entire process at the various levels of decision-making in government.

1. The Desk Officer system

The Desk Officer system should be introduced in a phased manner, beginning with a few departments, like Home, Personnel, Industries and Commerce, Agriculture, Administrative Reforms and Training, etc., and gradually covering all major departments.

In this system, the files, papers, etc. related to a subject are processed and put up by an officer – the Desk Officer (DO) – who is an Under Secretary, a Deputy Secretary or a Joint Secretary. The DO is helped by a few (one or two, sometimes more) support staff called Administrative Assistants (AAs). These AAs are like personal assistants/ stenographers, who are also well conversant in the work of the “desk”. UDAs/ LDAs do not put up files; they may, however, help the DO in finding relevant information, documents, precedent, background, etc., though proper record keeping can minimize that need.

If the DO system is introduced, the support staff can be found from the UDAs, LDAs and typists by training and redeploying them as Administrative Assistants (AA – grade I, II, III). The Superintendents of the departments may act as the custodian of records of the “desks”.

The DO system can speed up movement of files by cutting the levels of decision-making and making the entire process more efficient. The DO can also take the lead role and facilitate the decision process on complex, multi-dimensional subjects, where wider consultations and getting opinions of many are desirable.

The DO can be an Under Secretary/ Deputy Secretary/ Joint Secretary – depending on the importance of the subject and the availability of officers, but he/she should be one of the best officers in the department, since the success of the system depends on the quality of the officer. The senior most Secretary should nominate the DO, who can also reallocate the desks from time to time among the DOs in the department.

The DO should be only for priority work – decided by the senior most Secretary. For each important subject handled within a department, there could be a DO (this will need a well-defined distribution of work among the officers in the department), and one officer can handle several “desks” (which may even be in different departments).

The details can be worked out after studying the DO system in the Government of India, where this system has been working in many departments for quite some time, and in some other states (Haryana, Punjab) where Secretariat work has been reorganized/ redesigned recently. The Kerala Administrative Reforms Commission has also recommended the introduction of the DO system.

The DO was introduced in Assam Secretariat a few decades back, but it failed for various reasons, including the fact that not much thought was given to properly planning the system before introducing it, work distribution was not well-defined, necessary support staff were not provided and the officers assigned were not knowledgeable about the work of the desks.

II. Streamlining the workflow

The following recommendations for streamlining the workflow in the Secretariat may be considered; if accepted, they will need to be taken into account in updating the Manual of Office Procedure.

1. The levels of decision-making should be reduced to a maximum of three:
 - a) The processing level – the Desk Officer
 - b) The deciding level – Secretary/ Commissioner/ Principal Secretary, as per the allocation of work
 - c) The approving level – Secretary/ Commissioner/ Principal Secretary/ CS/ Minister/ CM/ Cabinet/Governor, as per the Rules of Executive Business

The senior most officer in the department, while making the distribution of work among the officers in the department, should also define the levels at which the various matters would be disposed off.

2. The officer to whom the Dak is addressed should pass orders or indicate the course of action on the body of the Dak. A large proportion of papers can be disposed off in this manner.

3. The officer concerned should make priority markings on the body of important Dak so that the importance of the paper is well understood by the diarist and the staff.
4. To ensure time-bound disposal of Dak and files, the senior most officer in the department should review the pendency list every fortnight.
5. Opening of part files should be allowed only with the express approval of the senior most Secretary in the department.
6. Consultations with the referral departments, e.g., Finance, Personnel (B), Administrative Reforms and Training, etc., should be judiciously used – and not without the approval of the concerned Secretary. The referral departments should dispose off the files within a fortnight.

III. The Rules/Manuals of Office Procedure

Since the provisions of the Manual of Office Procedure guide the movement of files and disposal of work in the Secretariat, the following recommendations are made.

1. The Manual of Office Procedure (Secretariat) 1981 should be updated, simplified, and adequate number of copies should be printed. The current Manual is old, bulky, and almost out of print, though the main ideas contained therein are still valid.
2. Extracts of the most relevant provisions of the Manual should be printed in a handy booklet form and be made available to Secretariat officers/staff for easy reference.
3. The Manual/Rules should be translated into official and associate languages.
4. Arrear lists, as provided in the Secretariat Manual, should be made mandatory.

IV. Training

Often the officers posted to the Secretariat from the field (Districts, Subdivisions, etc.) are not well conversant with the rules and procedures to be followed in Secretariat work. They have to depend upon the

Assistants, leading to loss in efficiency of decision-making. Therefore, the following recommendations are made.

1. Upon being posted for the first time to the Secretariat, officers should undergo orientation training, covering the Rules of Executive Business, the Manual of Office Procedure, etc. Training programmes should be designed accordingly, with relevant content, including the guidelines for speedy disposal of files.
2. Refresher courses on the lines suggested above may also be arranged for periodic training of the officers posted in the Secretariat, including those coming back to the state after long stints outside.
3. Equally important is the training of the Secretariat staff; they should be given induction as well as periodic refresher training. Guidelines for speedy disposal of files should be included and emphasized in these training programmes. Such training may also be linked to promotions, crossing of EB, etc.
4. The abovementioned training programmes, including those for the staff, can be organized at the Assam Administrative Staff College, with carefully developed content and the right kind of trainers, including guest faculty from outside.

V. IT applications/ E-Governance

A separate set of recommendations is being made, since IT has a very significant role to play in facilitating the movement of files and disposal of work in the Secretariat.

VI. Quick movement of files the in offices of Head of Department, Deputy Commissioner, Sub-Divisional Officer etc.

For speeding up disposal of files, some State Governments have introduced single file system for office of the Head of Department and Secretariat Department. This system will be effective if both the offices are located either in the same premises or in neighbourhood. But in our Capital, the offices of the Heads of Departments are scattered all over the city. Therefore introduction of single file system will instead of speeding up disposal, delay the movement jeopardizing the safety of the file.

There are procedural difficulties to introduce Desk Officer System in offices other than Secretariat Departments. However, there is ample scope to follow the principle of level-jumping in all Subordinate offices including offices of the Deputy Commissioner, Sub-Divisional Officer etc.