

# RECORDS THAT RESCUE: WHY STRONG DOCUMENTATION IS THE BACKBONE OF RESILIENT AND ACCOUNTABLE BUSINESSES

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## Abstract

*Records constitute the institutional memory of organisations, either reinforcing transparency, accountability, and readiness or exposing critical gaps that can lead to failure. This article examines the pivotal role of strong documentation in fostering organisational resilience, drawing lessons from Ghana's banking sector crisis (2017–2020) and international cases including Lehman Brothers, VBS Mutual Bank, and Iceland's financial collapse. It demonstrates how weak documentation exacerbates financial, operational, and reputational risks, while robust records governance enhances oversight, regulatory compliance, and stakeholder confidence. The discussion further explores how rising regulatory expectations, emerging technologies, and enterprise-wide records strategies are transforming documentation from a compliance requirement into a strategic enabler of resilience and organisational foresight.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's highly regulated and fast-changing business environment, documentation is no longer just an administrative task but a vital strategic asset. Well-organised and accurate records help organisations stay resilient, meet legal requirements, and enable the basis of decisions made to be ascertained with relative ease. Strong documentation supports every part of a business, from daily operations to governance and risk management by providing clarity, transparency and accountability.

The financial crisis in Ghana between 2017 and 2020 highlights the dangers of poor record-keeping. Many financial institutions failed partly because important documents were incomplete or missing. The regulator, receiver and liquidators faced major challenges verifying transactions, assessing liabilities, and tracing assets, which slowed down recovery efforts and damaged public trust. On the other hand, institutions with better documentation managed regulatory scrutiny and financial shocks more effectively. Documentation is not just about financial records. It strengthens legal claims and defenses, supports transparency, and ensures consistent oversight.

These challenges are not unique to Ghana. Globally, documentation failures have been a recurring theme in institutional collapses. The 2008 bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers revealed fragmented and opaque records that concealed liabilities and undermined market confidence.<sup>1</sup> In South Africa, VBS Mutual Bank fabricated deposit records to disguise fraud, misleading auditors and regulators until collapse was inevitable.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Iceland's 2008 financial crisis was worsened by hidden ownership structures and poorly documented related-party lending, which undermined regulatory oversight and delayed recovery.<sup>3</sup> Collectively, these cases underscore a fundamental insight: robust documentation is essential to organisational survival.

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<sup>1</sup> Anton R. Valukas, *Lehman Brothers Holding Inc. Chapter 11 Proceedings Examiner's Report*, (Volume 2, United States Courts: Bankruptcy Court: Southern District of New York 2010).

<sup>2</sup> South African Reserve Bank, *VBS Mutual Bank – The Great Bank Heist: Report into the collapse of VBS Mutual Bank*. Pretoria: South African Reserve Bank 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Patrizia Baudino and others, *The banking crisis in Iceland* (FSI Crisis Management Series No 1 edn, Bank for International Settlements 2020).

## 2. EVOLVING REGULATORY EXPECTATIONS

Recognising the consequences of inadequate documentation, regulators worldwide have elevated record-keeping from a procedural obligation to a strategic imperative. What was once a back-office formality is now a key indicator of organisational health, resilience, and credibility. International frameworks reflect this shift. Basel III requires banks to maintain clear, auditable documentation of capital adequacy and risk exposures, promoting transparency in financial stability (Basel Committee on Banking Supervision, 2017).<sup>4</sup> International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) issued by the IASB mandates financial statements grounded in verifiable records to ensure a ‘true and fair view’ of financial performance.<sup>5</sup> The EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) emphasises traceable, secure records for personal data management, with penalties directly tied to documentation lapses.<sup>6</sup>

In Ghana, the Banks and Specialised Deposit-Taking Institutions Act, 2016 (Act 930), requires financial institutions to maintain accurate records for at least ten years, empowering the Bank of Ghana to enforce accountability and intervene decisively in times of crisis.<sup>7</sup>

Collectively, these frameworks indicate a global trend: documentation has moved beyond compliance to become a **strategic enabler**. Institutions that embed robust record-keeping practices improve decision-making, mitigate operational and credit risks, and cultivate trust with stakeholders (World Economic Forum, 2020; Abor & Adjasi, 2007)<sup>8<sup>9</sup></sup>. Neglecting documentation, in contrast, exposes institutions to regulatory sanctions, reputational damage, and systemic vulnerability.

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<sup>4</sup> Basel Committee on Banking Supervision, 2017. Basel III: Finalising post-crisis reforms. Basel: Bank for International Settlements.

<sup>5</sup> IASB, 2018. International Financial Reporting Standards. London: IFRS Foundation.

<sup>6</sup> General Data Protection Regulation [2016] OJ 2 119/P1. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32016R0679> accessed 01-08-2025.

<sup>7</sup> Banks and Specialised Deposit-Taking Institutions Act, 2016 (Act 930).

<sup>8</sup> World Economic Forum, Global risks report 2020. Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Joshua Abor and Charles Adjasi, 'Corporate governance and the small and medium enterprises sector: Theory and implications' [2007] 7(2) Corporate Governance (Bingley) <<https://doi.org/10.1108/14720700710739769>> accessed 2 August 2025.

### 3. TECHNOLOGY AND THE FUTURE OF DOCUMENTATION

Technological advancements are reshaping the scope and effectiveness of record-keeping. Today, technology allows organisations to move beyond static, paper-based archives toward dynamic, intelligent systems that enhance accuracy, accessibility, and security.

Some key technological advancements enabling this shift include:

- **Intelligent Document Processing (IDP):** AI-driven systems can classify, validate, and extract information from diverse documents, including contracts and financial reports, reducing human error and accelerating processing times.<sup>10</sup>
- **Blockchain:** Distributed ledger technology provides tamper-proof audit trails, ensuring document authenticity and regulatory transparency. Financial institutions have used blockchain to secure transaction records and strengthen oversight.<sup>11</sup>
- **Real-time Analytics:** Modern analytics platforms allow organisations to monitor compliance risks, detect anomalies, and respond to market or regulatory changes swiftly, reducing delays in critical decision-making<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, technology alone cannot solve all documentation challenges. In emerging economies such as Ghana, its adoption faces significant hurdles, including inadequate digital infrastructure, limited digital literacy among staff, high implementation costs, and gaps in regulatory alignment.<sup>13</sup> To be effective, technological solutions must be embedded within robust governance frameworks and accompanied by targeted capacity-building initiatives for employees. Organisations that succeed recognise that digital transformation is more than deploying tools. It requires **cultural adaptation, ongoing staff training, and alignment with local operational realities** to ensure adoption and sustainability.

<sup>10</sup> Raffaele Cioffi and others, *Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning Applications in Smart Production : Progress, Trends, and Directions*. Sustainability, 12(2), 492 2020. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12020492> accessed 2 August 2025.

<sup>11</sup> Gartner, 'Blockchain technology: Securing financial transactions'. Stamford: Gartner Research, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> David Kiron & Rebecca Shockley, 'Creating Business Value with Analytics'. MIT Sloan Management Review. 53. 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Clement Mintah and others, 'Do business records management affect business growth?' PLOS ONE, 17(3), 2022 e0264135. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0264135> accessed 2 August 2025.

#### 4. STRATEGIC RECORDS GOVERNANCE: BEYOND COMPLIANCE

Documentation achieves maximum value when treated as an enterprise-wide priority rather than a compliance checkbox. Every department—from finance and HR to operations, procurement, and IT—creates records that collectively shape organisational continuity, oversight, and resilience. Siloed approaches to documentation limit its potential and expose institutions to risk.

A robust records governance strategy should include:

- **Unified documentation policies:** Ensuring consistency and eliminating fragmentation across departments.
- **Cross-functional accountability:** Holding each department responsible for the records it generates.
- **Capacity-building initiatives:** Equipping staff with the skills and mindset necessary for effective records management.
- **Integrated technology systems:** Guaranteeing traceability, security, and accessibility across the organisation.

Empirical evidence underscores the importance of such strategies. Effective records governance enhances transparency and operational efficiency, supporting SME growth in Ghana.<sup>14</sup> Reliable documentation reduces credit risk and strengthens competitiveness<sup>15</sup>, and ISO 15489-1 positions structured record-keeping as essential to institutional accountability.<sup>16</sup> When strategically managed, documentation transforms compliance into foresight, enabling institutions to anticipate risks, adapt to change, and inspire stakeholder confidence.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Joshua Abor and Charles Adjasi, 'Corporate governance and the small and medium enterprises sector: Theory and implications' [2007] 7(2) Corporate Governance (Bingley) <<https://doi.org/10.1108/14720700710739769>> accessed 2 August 2025.

<sup>16</sup> International Organization for Standardization (ISO) (2016). *ISO 15489-1:2016 Information and documentation — Records management — Part 1: Concepts and principles*. 2nd ed. Geneva: International Organization for Standardization. Confirmed 2021.

## 5. FROM COMPLIANCE TO COMPETENCE: PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEADERS

Leaders play a pivotal role in transforming documentation from a bureaucratic requirement into a catalyst for institutional resilience. To achieve this, leaders should take the following key actions:

1. **Conduct regular documentation audits:** Identify gaps, verify accuracy, and evaluate governance processes to establish a solid foundation for continuous improvement.
2. **Develop cross-functional record policies:** Standardise procedures across departments to promote consistency, accountability, and regulatory compliance.
3. **Leverage Regulatory Technology (RegTech) solutions:** Automate the monitoring of regulatory obligations and streamline administrative workflows.
4. **Invest in staff training:** Build digital literacy and records management capabilities to embed best practices across the organisation.
5. **Integrate records into ESG frameworks:** Enhance transparency, accountability, and governance in sustainability reporting by aligning documentation with environmental, social, and governance (ESG) goals.
6. **Plan for scalability:** Design documentation systems that can evolve with institutional growth without compromising reliability or integrity.

By implementing these measures, organisations can reposition records as strategic assets enhancing operational efficiency, strengthening risk management, and reinforcing long-term credibility.

## 6. WILL YOUR RECORDS SURVIVE THE NEXT CRISIS?

In today's volatile business environment, organisations are continually exposed to financial shocks, regulatory changes, and operational disruptions—any of which can swiftly expose weaknesses in their systems. The collapses of institutions such as Lehman Brothers, VBS Mutual Bank, Icelandic banks, and the crisis in Ghana's financial sector highlight how poor documentation can leave organisations vulnerable, erode accountability, and amplify risk.

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To guard against such outcomes, leaders must take decisive action to assess the robustness of their business records. Every document, transaction, and process should be robust enough to withstand scrutiny and support swift, informed decision-making during times of crisis.

Achieving this requires a comprehensive reassessment of the **people, processes, and technologies** involved in documentation management. Employees must be equipped with the requisite skills and awareness to manage records effectively. The processes for documenting business records and information should be streamlined, standardised, and integrated across the organisation. Furthermore, technological systems should be strategically deployed to ensure data accuracy, accessibility, and security.

By aligning these three pillars, organisations can transform documentation from a compliance necessity into a strategic asset—one that protects the business, mitigates operational and reputational risks, and enhances resilience.

The call to action for business leaders is clear and urgent: **evaluate the strength of your records today, embed robust governance frameworks, leverage technology wisely, and foster a culture of comprehensive documentation.** Those who do will not only weather the inevitable disruptions of a turbulent business landscape but will emerge stronger, more agile, and more trusted in a world where transparency, accountability, and foresight define long-term success.

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*In today's fast-moving business landscape, reliable documentation is no longer optional—it is a lifeline. Well-structured, accurate records empower organisations to navigate crises, uphold accountability, and drive sustainable growth. By strategically aligning **people, processes, and technology**, businesses can turn documentation into a vital asset that protects operations, builds stakeholder trust, and transforms uncertainty into opportunity. The critical question is: are your records truly adequate and ready to safeguard your business when challenges arise?*