Managing Records and Information within Your Organization

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You may already have a records management program in your organization, or recognize that you need one. How do you make your program effective across all of the content within your organization?

One perspective that I have found helpful is not to treat records management in isolation. Records management practices that are required are not that different from those needed to manage the other assets of the organization. The bottom line is how to bring structure to chaos.

When I talk about the Enterprise Content Management (ECM) and Electronic Records Management (ERM) computer applications that have been developed over the years to manage unstructured information, I often ask “how do you manage unstructured information?” The answer is by having these applications apply structure to it. In the same way, management functions need to manage disorder by implementing centralized control of the subject.

After the Second World War, organizations implemented centralized control of Human Resources, to properly manage the human resources of the organization, and centralized control of Finance, to properly manage the capital assets of the organization. To properly manage the information assets of our organizations, Records Management is no different. Across all three administrative functions, there is the requirement for enterprise-wide policies and procedures, management control tools (organization chart, chart of accounts and a classification scheme) and specialists to perform associated administrative activities.

Below, you will see the information governance framework that we use in the ERM Specialist Class. This framework could also represent both Human Resources and Finance.
While some organizations are reluctant to create a separate corporate records management division, we are finding this structure within the Legal department, Compliance, Risk Management or some other area of the organization.

Where this perspective is valuable to me, is in considering approaches to managing the information assets. I frequently ask if a similar approach exists in Human Resources and Finance or whether it would be acceptable in those areas. One good example is the current approach of using a “big bucket” means of managing our records – instead of providing a more granular means of identifying the various records in our organizations, we use much larger categories. In all my years of having to prepare annual budgets, I have never had the budget staffs tell me I could consolidate a number of expense accounts to make my job easier. The message, here, for me is that we need the level of granularity with our retention schedules to meet the business needs of our organizations – addressing compliance, efficiency, and effectiveness of our operations.

On the particular topic of the “big bucket” approach to retention schedules, I have no issue with starting with having larger categories of records to make it easier for users to file or capture their records properly, but as the users become comfortable with the idea that there is a proper place to capture their records, we should not stop there, but continue to get more granular to get to the level that best serves the business needs of the organization.

**Information Governance**

This is a popular term in the discussion of managing information and records. I mentioned earlier that we have experienced the centralized control of Human Resources and Finance. In the same way, we need to apply uniform structure for our information and records. This is especially imperative now that we need to manage electronic content and records and we now have the computer applications that will allow us to do so. An important theme of electronic records management is that we should be sharing information across all locations, division and departments. A core requirement is that we should be able to find the business information we need, not only today or next month, but over the many years that some business information must be retained. There is the absolute requirement to establish controlled vocabulary that will enable this.

In the ISO 15489-1:2001 Information and documentation -- Records management -- Part 1: General, and more specifically in, ISO/TR 15489-2:2001 Information and documentation -- Records management -- Part 2: Guidelines, there is the discussion of records management instruments – the need for a classification scheme, metadata model, thesaurus and other controls. Just as we can not invent new job titles or come up with our own expense accounts, there needs to be consistency.

The good news is that we can use the functionality found in the ERM computer applications to control the use of these terms. Through the use of drop-down menus and the selection of the appropriate item using radio buttons, the technology can drive compliance.

We can also learn from the earlier efforts of centralized control in Human Resources and Finance during which staff were upset and knew that this control just would not work. We are to expect push-back from staff and recognize that proper thought must be put into this effort, there is the need for user involvement and sound change management efforts will be required. We do have answers for: “What’s in it for me” for users and managers. The response I will be striving for is for staff to ask “how did we get anything done, or find any information, with the older ways of working”.

Making a Successful Transition

The Gimmal Group presented some interesting thoughts in the Specialist Course of the SharePoint class:

1. Change business records to a broader scope of business information and content

The Federal Rules of Civil Procedures (FRCP) are the rules that judges must follow within the U.S. Federal Courts. In December, 2006, there was a major amendment to these rules that codified the use of electronic evidence, called electronically stored information (ESI). Many state legal jurisdictions have accepted these rules, or similar ones. The major consideration is that all electronic content is admissible if it is relevant to the case and there is no client-attorney privilege associated with it. While it is my contention that records management professionals have never ignored non-record content in their organizations, it has become more important to both know what content exists and to properly manage it. From this amendment, it is also clear that an organization needs to know what information is created from their computer systems and where it is stored. Asking similar questions to those we currently use with a records/information survey or inventory, we can learn what information exists, how it is stored and how long it needs to be retained to serve the purposes of the organization.

2. Change records management to retention management

This is a narrower perspective to the previous point. The Gimmal Group establishes three states for information: temporary, work in process and records. For records, we are accustomed to identifying an event or trigger, which initiates the retention period, and then the length of time the records are to be retained after that trigger. For temporary information and work in process, we would use the creation date of the information as the initiation of the retention period which could be from days, months or a number of years.

3. Change information management to information governance

Here, the Gimmal Group is distinguishing between the need for control and ownership and accountability. From what has been presented above, there is the need for information management within an organization. Policies and records management instruments must be developed and maintained. A very important consideration is that processes must be developed that support the policies and the ERM systems need to be configured/customized to use the approved instruments. This requires specialized staff. There has been considerable discussion about whether records management professionals will be needed in the future with the changing technology and business information. It is exactly because of this chaotic environment that such specialized staff will be needed. What is clear is that their skills will be much different from those professionals handling physical records.

4. Change the consideration of a specialized function to generalized capability

The Gimmal Group argues that records management is no longer a specialized function performed by a few to support the many. This is an important consideration for your program – are you operating in a vacuum? While I have argued that we need professionals on board, perhaps, Certified Records Managers (CRM) and Electronic Records Management Masters (ERM™), we need to spread the sense of ownership and accountability to all of the members of our organizations. All levels of management
need to know that they have records management responsibilities, just as they have personnel and budget responsibilities. A US Federal Government Department is having online training courses developed for their staff. Roughly 20 minutes in length, with test questions, these courses will be oriented toward management, users, records management support and IT support staff. These courses will have to be taken on an annual basis.

Some individuals suggest that we are trying to make all users records management professionals. That is absolutely not the case. However, we need to broaden the perspectives of users to include that they are creating important business information and there is a proper place to store their different information. It is the role of the records management professionals to develop a classification scheme which is easy for the users to navigate and understand. It is also important for the users to handle their information and records appropriately while they are creating, receiving and working with it. We have all experienced the frustration and aggravation of trying to find our files after we have “dumped” them on our C: drives, network shared drives, or allowed emails to get buried in our inboxes. For us to be successful, we need to communicate the importance of sound stewardship to staff in our organizations. We need to provide training courses for the users. An excellent first step is to have information/records management training for the newly hired.

The Gimmal Group discusses enabling control through processes and technology. This is absolutely true! We should be looking at office procedures that are currently followed, consider business process management enhancements and build record keeping steps in the processes. Through ERM system applications and SharePoint, we can introduce workflows, and automated capture processes, so that the users don’t even know that they are carrying out actual records management activities. Through tight integration between the ERM solutions and the office, and other business, applications, we can capture the information/records simply and quickly.

**Developing structure with the content created using E2.0 means of working and communications**

For decades, we have been applying structure to unstructured information and records in a consistent and arduous manner for both physical and electronic records by identifying what content exists in our organizations and, then, applying structure to it. A general management principle that I have always believed in is: “You can’t manage what you don’t know about”. The lack of knowledge of the office processes and the information and records they generated has been an impediment to managing the content. So, the common practice was to carry out an information survey, or the more granular records inventory, to find what our holdings were and identify records series, at the bottom of our classifications schemes, and through an analytical effort establish the different information and records ownership, security, and values of the information to establish retention periods. Although difficult, this was doable and we could be successful.

The question is now that we have the content being generated by non-traditional means, through the use of instant messaging, blogs, wikis, collaboration tools and social networks, how do we apply structure to this content?
Cynefin (pronounced kun-ev’in) Framework

Patrick Lambe, in his book “Organising Knowledge: Taxonomies, Knowledge and Organisational Effectiveness (2007)” presents a discussion using the Cynefin Framework (Kurtz and Snowden (2003)).

This framework was originally developed by Dave Snowden, while at IBM, as a model to describe problems, situations and systems. The model provides a typology of contexts that guides what sort of explanations and/or solutions may apply.

It was proposed by Patrick Lambe that the Cynefin framework could be used as a filter or lens with which to determine whether taxonomies are an appropriate technique to be applied to bodies of content or knowledge. The Cynefin framework differentiates the kinds of content collections that organisations typically have to manage.

Beginning in the simplest realm in the lower-right quadrant of the model is the “known” quadrant. Information, content or knowledge is simple, predictable, stable and slow-moving, and hence, likely to be easily placed into a structure. I would suggest that this has been much of the information and records that we have been addressing in the past with the inventory and apply structure approach. With this type of content, we were easily able to identify the various distinct records series and document their characteristics. The approach we have used in this area does not work in the other areas.
The value of this framework is the realization that not all content falls in this quadrant - simple, predictable, stable and slow-moving. Different approaches need to be used to apply structure to content that falls into the following quadrants:

In the upper-right quadrant is the area of the “knowable” where content is not fully documented and available to the general populace, but needs interpretation via specialists in the area to help define boundaries. To the specialists familiar with the content, they can (perhaps with some debate among themselves) provide clear categories around the information at hand.

In the bottom-left quadrant is the area of the “chaotic,” where boundaries are unclear, no rules have been put in place, and where it is difficult to put hard and fast labels or categories on the content at hand. The chaotic quadrant is not well suited to traditional structure, but may instead benefit from creation of more dynamic, free-form, grouping methods, as a way to begin to move out of chaos and into the “complex” realm.

The upper-left quadrant, then, is the “complex” area, where the information space is still being defined, but has perhaps LARGE, general categories that are helping to make sense of the information at hand, and over time, becoming refined and moving into the realm of the “knowable.”

By examining the stated business needs and the prioritisation of those, and the state of the targeted information and records, as determined in the information survey, it may be useful to filter your need for structure, as well as the approach to the solution, through the use of the Cynefin framework.

For the information and records that fall into the Complex and Chaos areas of this framework, it may be necessary to develop records series, not based on the existing content, but based on the need to manage the content – applying ownership, security and retention requirements. As mentioned above, we may have a lot of information that is considered temporary or work in process. We need to establish categories, or records series, to capture this content and to properly manage it. The goal is to have records series, or categories, for the content in the organization.

A good example of this is one approach in email management, referred to as implementing the “ERM zones”. These are basically folders within the email client that can be used to do a first pass at retention.

The first zone is the inbox itself. It contains messages that have been recently received but not yet acted upon. Messages in this zone are retained for a very short period before being automatically deleted – 30 or 60 days is not uncommon.

The next zone is the “working zone”. This zone is used for messages that have been reviewed and determined to be of some value, but which are related to specific projects, work items, or transactions. At the end of these projects or transactions, it is expected that the majority of these messages will be discarded. This zone has a longer retention period, for example 180 days or 1 year, before messages are automatically deleted.

The third zone is the “records zone”. This zone is used for messages that are important enough that they are to be declared and managed as records. In the ideal case, these messages will be moved from the messaging system to the ERM system where they will be managed just like any other electronic
In some instances, users will simply put their “important” messages into the “records” folder to await further review and classification by records staff.

Our structure needs to be made available to the users for their benefits. We want user involvement with the creation of the structure and then we need to educate the users on the structure, itself. As mentioned above, we are not making the users records management professionals, but they need to know that there is a proper place for their information and records.

In SharePoint, the control of content and content types is fundamental to the control and constrains on the types of content that may be created and managed in the system. A consistent set of content types should be created across sites within the organization. Your management plan needs to establish how new enterprise content types are to be requested and either approved or denied. In the same way, various record series need to be available to meet the needs of the users, both records and other content, in all areas of the organization.

Technology has moved us from simply managing paper records, to electronic records, to managing information and records created through instant messaging, blogs, wikis, mobile devices and social networks. Within our organization management structure, we will need to consider whether the content is even under our control. What content is being created and stored on external internet sites and third party applications is something that we need to be aware of. We may find some of this chaotic content, discussed above, will need to be identified as outside our control and therefore identified by its own separate category. This is one of many considerations that need to be made.

By appreciating the Cynefin Framework – that there is content that is different from the simple, predictable, stable and slow-moving records that we have managed in the past, it allows us to investigate solutions to the new records and information which we are finding within our organizations.

Join the members of the Richmond Chapters of AIIM and ARMA for AIIM’s ERM 1-day Practitioner Class on April 26, 2011. Please contact your Chapters for more information.