What's most businesses' missing link? – a filing strategy

A practical approach to hard copy records management in today's evolving and ever changing environment

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'Filing tends to be the afterthought that makes its presence felt in the most inopportune times on a project'

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Clinton has a strong background in filing consultancy and information management due to his background as Senior Project Consultant and New Business Development Manager for an independent information management consultancy that specialised in helping companies manage electronic, paper and hard copy documents so that their workforce could get on with the business of achieving broader corporate goals.

As a Senior Project consultant, Clinton ran Continuous Professional Development (CPD) events with his then Managing Director, and spoke at Business Development presentations creating and growing the awareness of this complex consultancy.

Clinton has worked with clients across all sectors and been exposed to clients that have previously made Records and Information Management a priority and conversely, successfully managed numerous, often varied, projects with other clientele to help them align their goals with the demands the modern environment imposes on businesses of today.

Abstract

Records and Information Management have become buzzwords in today's modern business environment. Although they have been topics of debate through the decades among our often cosmopolitan and diverse working forces across the globe, the issue is now more than ever making its importance and impact felt and known across just about every sector due to compliance regulations and statutes. So the question currently posed, is just what is Records and Information Management and how can it be effectively managed or brought up to speed (inline with current definitions) without upsetting an organization's expediency?

Keywords: barcode tracking, change management, document retention protocols (DRP), electronic document management (EDM), information management (IM), live storage, offsite storage, paperless environment, radio frequency identification (RFID), records management (RM), return on investment (ROI)

Introduction

My goal is to explain what is seen on a daily basis and how to implement the changes required – in layman's terms, easy English, and none of the mumbo-jumbo consultancy lingo that gets so loosely slung about when this topic is approached. I will approach this from more of a hard copy aspect of Records and Information Management.

This is hands on findings, experience and practical solutions – not rocket science.

So let us start by setting out some boundaries or common ground before walking through the realities and practicalities, without getting too caught up in the detail – I promise it will not be more grandiose than the definitions that follow.

The theory

According to current definitions found online:

Records management, or RM, is the practice of identifying, classifying, archiving, preserving, and destroying records.

The ISO 15489: 2001 standard defines it as 'The field of management responsible for the efficient and systematic control of the creation, receipt, maintenance, use and disposition of records, including the processes for capturing and maintaining evidence of and information about business activities and transactions in the form of records'.

While one can also read that:

The ISO defines **records** as 'information created, received, and maintained as evidence and information by an organization or person, in pursuance of legal obligations or in the transaction of business'. The International Council on Archives (ICA) Committee on Electronic Records defines a **record** as 'a recorded information produced or received in the initiation, conduct or completion of an institutional or individual activity and that comprises content, context and structure sufficient to provide evidence of the activity'.

So what can we deduce?

From this it is evident that Records Management and Information Management are widely debated and opinionated areas with no exact or precise formula's, global policies, or set practices – it is an arena of various disciplines that battle to find a harmonious blend and set synergy, however. We can deduce that the essentials and common grounds that need to be accommodated in any approach to the subject are:

- creating

- storing

- retrieving and

- destroying information

- within the latest parameters of compliance and statutory obligations

So what is the impact of this on every day business and what are the typical questions this will raise?

- What needs to be kept and for how long?

- What is the organization's Document Retention Policy stand point?

- In what format should this information be kept – paper and/or electronic?

- What are the cost implications of this to the organization?

- What quantity of paper is required to support the business requirements?

- What is the best way:

- To store this paper?

- To access this information?

- To retrieve the relevant and required piece of information in a file?

- How do we work within a realigned or updated environment and what protocols govern this?

The reality

Now while you may question some of the previous questions raised, they essentially imply that not many organizations are at the point of advancement the definitions and debates on the web imply – the implication is true. What is holding them back?

From a hands on client facing perspective, not many organizations have started down the road of aligning working practices with current 'deemed' standards or protocols.

The main reasons being:

- The client has not been implicated or interrogated in a matter or dispute that has highlighted the importance of effective and complaint Records Management

- The perceived cost of reviewing, structuring and implementing policies, protocols and practices is too high

- Not knowing where to find the right consultants to carry out the right projects

- Not knowing what the available options are and the cost implications of each

- Ownership: Unclear requirements and governmental steer and therefore the wish to avoid the 'headache' most organizations perceive, Records, Filing and Information Management to be.

Bridging the gap with the missing link

The following are simple steps and solutions that can be explored and if implemented can lead to greater efficiency in the storing, retrieving, managing and flow of information and records within an organization. Naturally every organization or business operates differently and there will be varying degrees of applicability, and therefore the steps follow no particular sequence or order, although an internal understanding of a particular organizations working will often make this self-explanatory.

Some of these may seem glaringly obvious but you will be surprised at how few organizations have taken any action at all in light of the following steps.

Document Retention Policy (DRP)

First of all, establish whether or not the organization has one and if so how is it being implemented and adhered to. Very often, particularly within larger organizations, users are not even aware such a policy does or should exist. This exposes the organization or business at risk on both ends of the legal scale. If documents are kept longer than they should be it could have consequences as dire as if the documents were disposed of prematurely. Holding onto a document that should have been purged in accordance with the Data Protection or Freedom of Information Act will fast expose any Records Management flaws within a business and launch investigations that cost time, money and potentially jobs of all involved and implicated.

If no policy exists employ the services of an internal policy team or external consultants to create one.

An organization may view this as costly initially but it will far outweigh any cost related to not having such a policy if investigated or interrogated. It is more a question of 'can you afford not to?'.

House keeping

Probably the most dreaded and neglected area of Records Management, and yet probably the most effective in moving the organization towards a 'Paper Less' intensive environment and a more electronic and efficient flow of information.

In my consultancy work I engage with the users on an every day working practice level and through a hands on approach seldom achieve anything less than a 40 per cent rationalization of physical files and paper work – some organizations have pushed their rationalisation bar to the next level and steered towards a minimum 60 per cent reduction.

The result – a frightening realization that the paper being purged is quite possibly some of the most expensive paper the world has to offer, particularly in prime office areas and first world cities where real estate is at a premium. Why?

Sixty per cent less paper and filing means the following:

- Sixty per cent less demand on new storage requirements, if moving; refurbishing or relocating and procuring new cabinets and therefore 60% less capital outlay

- The floor space previously demanded for the accommodation of the now redundant 60% of storage can be used for fee earners or other core business service providers OR less space is required altogether – rents, rates and charges are combated with fee earners in the same amount of space or they are greatly reduced. Factor in the term of the lease and the savings become hard to resist.

- Sixty percent less needs to be relocated – so there is both less resource and less time required to relocate, thus cost cutting on any current and future project expenditure

- Less filing stationery (physical files) and paper is required thus cost cutting stationery expenditure

As much as house keeping leads to an apparent element or requirement for slack resources or staff downtime it does not necessarily need to cost the business much from an outlay perspective and in reality leads to sustainable cost savings on an ongoing and long-term basis.

Centralized storage

Now this is a somewhat overused phrase, and each project team and client seems to have their own perceptions on what it means – which is perfectly understandable. After all it is a term often coined to identify a physical area of storage, however, the understanding needs to be made clear within its context.

So what is the ideal description? I would suggest it is holding all team and organizational related filing and media in a high density centrally located and efficiently packed bank of storage.

This means:

- making use of high density mobile racking

- using 'lateral shelf based filing' stationery applications

- storing the bank in a centrally located position for all users to access

- minimizing demands on floor space

- minimizing demand for cabinet quantities, capacities and proximities to desks

The benefits of making use of a centralized storage application are:

- The mobile racking units can be stored in areas of 'dead work space' such as basements, thus maximizing efficiency of prime office space, reducing costs of fittings and finishes including lighting, air-conditioning, aesthetically appealing furniture unit finishes

- The application lends itself to an organizational approach and strategy to standardised naming conventions and stationery; and to the accessing and retrieval of records and documentation

- All filing can be tracked from a central point through Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) or Bar-coding, which brings about huge security benefits

- Users become accustomed to not having files to hand and start working more electronically and independently of hard copy documentation. This is also particularly helpful when reviewing archives and sending documents to archive.

Users typically avoid archives as they have stigmatized the facility as a black hole and point of no return. With a centralized approach it gives users comfort in knowing documents do not have to be to hand but they can retrieve them – the change management is greatly facilitated towards Archive or Live Storage, as it is then just a taking a small step forward to achieve and not a full change management piece.

The cost of high density units can be more expensive than cabinets from a capital outlay perspective, dependent on the number of cabinets required, however, the Return on Investment (ROI) if implemented in a non-prime office space area, the floor space saving and the step it takes towards 'Paper Less' intensive ways of working typically outweigh capital expenditure from a fiscal and change management stand point.

Stationery applications

Stationery applications, at times, can come with somewhat awkward change management and working practice user resistance, but the pay offs can be monumental if long-term sustainable solutions are agreed and implemented across an organization.

The aforementioned Lateral Shelf Based file/folder solution is predominantly the application that offers the most all round sustainability.

Files or folders that sit with the spines on a shelf and hold paper in a horizontal position rather than vertically as in a ring binder or lever arch folder/box file – the result is more shelves, or levels if you like, per each storage unit making for optimum usage of a unit, no wasted space storing air in the unit and additional storage capacity within the same storage footprint. These files also only grow as thick as the paper they contain.Unlike ring binders where the spine is of fixed width, these applications often have flexible spines/gussets that expand and contract with the quantity of paper they contain.

Furthermore, if the application is implemented across an entire organization, future relocations/restacks become far more cost effective; fluid and efficient in nature – cabinet specifications are standardised by

width and internals and shelf-based units are cheaper than drawer based units. The end result is cheaper, faster, easier relocation projects, something that is becoming ever more prominent in today's world of flexible working.

Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) and Bar-code tracking

RFID and Bar-code tracking are applications, which if utilized to maximum capacity, can be used to track files from creation through to destruction within an organization. This aids security measures as individuals are forced to take ownership of files and business assets and files can be safe guarded within the gateways set up in the building, avoiding issues of lost files that land up in the wrong hands in the wrong places because they should never have been removed in the first place.

Live Storage

Live Storage is a facility similar to that of an Archive but instead of holding records that are sitting out the remaining period of their life cycle, they hold current documentation that can be called to site within a matter of a few hours.

So what can this deliver and where does it postion an organization?

In today's current economic climate, it is a given that the majority of businesses are going to be looking to contracting or consolidating – change is almost not a choice at present but a survival tactic.

So let us take a hypothetical, but very realistic, view of what can be achieved and the outcome of that given the few points explained earlier:

- A Document Retention Policy is either compiled or enforced more stringently giving users the confidence to do house keeping more rigorously and ruthlessly

- The business meanwhile sends out a Directorate of a minimum 50 per cent rationalization in hardcopy storage capacity

- A set of audits or surveys are conducted to understand pre- and post-rationalization figures and ensure the required targets are being met

- The filing stationery is reviewed to attain more filing in less footprint which further reduces the overall total space requirement or storage

- The remaining storage is now of contractual, legal or compliance related matter or for reference only – the bare minimum requirement. Very often this can be sent to archive to serve the remaining years of its life cycle and relieve the storage demand onsite furthermore)

- This storage is moved into non fee earning or not prime office space at less cost than the office environment, and releases valuable and expensive real estate to the business

- More fee earners or core business staff can be employed and put in place of what was previously storage or the business moves into a consolidated floor plate lowering overheads. Alternatively the newly released office space could be sublet

- The business's bottom line increases and users now work more electronically and independently of their hard copy duplicate comfort storage

- The business is now ready to take their Records and Document Management to the next level of complexity – Electronic Document Management and Information Management by employing the services of professionals from varied disciplines with a strong emphasis on Information Technology (IT) and its capabilities

- The office environment becomes 'Paper Less' intensive and more IT based

- The Return On Investment from the consolidation and rationalization goes towards funding future projects.

The philosophy and history behind the paperless office

The 'paperless' office has been a term and topic debated since the 1970s and has been the ideology behind an

office environment without paper. The reality seems to be that paper seems set to stay – at least for the foreseeable future – it is just the quantities that will fluctuate. You will note I make reference to 'Paper Less' meaning less of it, a less paper intensive environment rather than an environment without paper. I personally could not imagine a day in the office without a post-it note.

The term came about when the Personal Computer (PC) entered the markets and the belief was that it would replace paper altogether. The actual sequence of events was an increased paper load as printing and creating paper work became more efficient. This, thankfully, is believed to have hit its plateau in 2000 and since then has been decreasing as more users have become IT based and computer literate and, comfortable with digital documentation. There has also been a slight generation shift – the younger generations being more accustomed to using digital documents as opposed to printing them out.

Coupled to this are the pressures around cost savings, access efficiency, space saving and the driving force behind transparency and the requirements to share information.

Is there potential to be paperless?

When considering there are more and more technology and products coming to market facilitating being more paperless and more IT based we could very well see the Paperless Environment. That, of course, is if the challenges can be overcome.

Below are the current challenges being faced:

- Government regulations

- Business practices and 'buy-in'

- The generational shift of receiving, accessing, working with and sharing digital information and documentation

- The life span of digital documents in the light of the rate of technological change, and whether they will still be accessible to IT systems of the future?

There are products and ways of working in the market place already that could quite easily see the

beginning of paperless meetings and yet retain business expediency.

Picture the scene:

- a digital flipchart with information displayed by projector

- the projector displaying information of, for arguments sake, board meeting minutes

- the minutes being stored on a remote access website

- each board member present whether in the same board room or on the other side of the world) has a digital tablet or access to the document via a web link

- The presenter, if there is one, can write on the presentation or document on display (in the same way each member can write on their plaques) by writing on the electronic flipchart – this can even be done in different colours.

And there you have a paperless meeting with all the functionality paper currently provides BUT with none of the duplication – there is one comprehensive set of annotated minutes being stored in one central and easily accessible location.

In my personal opinion I truly do not believe paper will be totally redundant in the near future – or ever for that matter.

So who is getting ahead and what is the future?

I would argue that the formula described above is the future – files centrally stored through standardized RFID tracked, protocols containing only the statutory and legal documents and IT based Electronic Document Management Systems providing frameworks and access to user's everyday working files and documents.

When do we think this will happen? Only time can tell, but what is strongly evident is that organizations that take Records and Information Management as a Management discipline are making progress and moving with the times. Those that see it as an Administrative task for support staff are floundering and finding it increasingly difficult to adapt to modern trends and requirements – both statutory and through market forces. Hardcopy record management needs to

be designed into the organization's strategy in a way that allows for flow, and rapid fluid change and adaptability – otherwise it hinders progress and holds organizations back.

Filing tends to be the after thought that makes its presence felt in the most inopportune times on a project. This results in frustration for all involved – very often more so for the organization's client and users than anyone else.

I believe that Filing Audits and an understanding of an organization's ways of working should be at the forefront of Project Planning – that is in the feasibility stage.

An early understanding, early management buy-in, followed by early engagement and user buy-in, results in massive reductions, clear understanding, less time pressure and the end result of workplace efficiency in the day-to-day creation, destruction, retrieval, accessibility and general involvement of Record and Information Management within the daily workplace practices.

It's not rocket science – just small measurable steps that prevent and solve big headaches and help organizations make big savings.

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