

Digital Processes at NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet

The Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC) is the lead agency for a number of NSW Government programs and services. In addition to its role providing support for the Premier and the operation of Cabinet, it works in diverse areas such as major events, developing regulation, social and economic policy, leading strategic communications for the public sector, and conducting international engagement.

This case study outlines DPC's Electronic Document and Records Management (EDRM) Program strategy and the successes the EDRM team has had to date in transitioning their organisation to a fully digital operating environment. This includes the vision and concepts underpinning the delivery of the program, that is, the 'brand management' approach to marketing, cultural change, training and support, and one of their signature projects, electronic approval workflows. The case study describes DPC's deliberate adoption of a different approach, a 'cultural adoption' delivery approach.

The case study is adapted from a presentation [delivered to the Records Managers Forum in August 2015](#).

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Overview

Many information managers face the challenge of attempting to sell large, one-off programs of work for the purposes of business transformation. To address this challenge, DPC focused on building internal capacity, culture, and behaviour, rather than relying on externally imposed, time-limited initiatives. A long-term program with an open flexible roadmap was used to deliver a cultural shift that addressed the changes imposed by technological trends.

The DPC EDRM team supports over 500 DPC staff in their information management requirements through day-to-day support and business project delivery.

Program achievements

Over the course of five years, the DPC EDRM program delivered around 15 whole-of-department business, performance improvement, and technology projects. The finite budget for the program was carefully managed to an underspend for each year of its duration. This program of work:

- Introduced information management as a concept to the Department, retired network drives, and adopted a centralised document management system.
- Retired information silos and implemented a collaborative security model aligned to the NSW information security guidelines.
- Introduced a mobility platform to work anywhere via remote desktop or on any DPC mobile device.
- Digitised paper records holdings.
- Introduced a single, generic, fully electronic approval process for all the department's processes.
- Transitioned correspondence management processes to digital practices.
- Fundamentally revised whole-of-department and business critical processes as part of each of these activities.

The benefits are appreciable across the Department and supported by the Executive. Some of the success measures include:

- Effectively 100% adoption of digital information management across the business.
- An improved execution time for key approval/workflow processes. They are 36% quicker across the board, and some processes have demonstrated a threefold improvement.
- 95%+ of information is now managed electronically, and confidence in the robustness of digital records is extremely high.
- Digitisation practices have reduced paper storage by more than 70%, and enabled a digital activity based working environment.
- 94% of ministerials are delivered on time, a jump from 56% within 12 weeks.
- Briefing quality has improved; the return rates from the Secretary's office have halved.
- Digital correspondence processes have removed the printing of 12,000 pieces of correspondence per year, in favour of digital delivery.

These changes also translate into real savings. In real cost terms, annual paper storage costs were reduced by \$200-\$300k and annual records management costs were reduced by \$200k. DPC also estimate (very conservatively) efficiency savings of \$1M+ to the Department annually.

Strategy

These initiatives were simultaneously business improvements and cultural changes. Across all these initiatives, user adoption is at about 100%. They rely on delivering value to users, which is reflected through users' willingness to use the systems. The initiatives enabled good governance and compliance, but were not presented as compliance projects. DPC's EDRM team learnt that there are four aspects that must be addressed to produce an effective information management strategy:

First: Fundamentally, information strategies must change culture to be effective.

Second: The landscape in which we work continually changes, and priorities for one executive do not necessarily translate into priorities of another. They have seen many changes at executive and senior levels during the program period.

Third: Large programs of work are a necessity in this field, but the return on investment is not immediate because it is associated with the business adoption of the technology and inventive ways of using it, not simply a technology implementation. A successful EDRM implementation program may still take two or more years to appreciably realise benefits.

Four: Strategies need to be equally driven from the bottom up and from the top down. It is important not to shy away from executive support, requests or direction, but equally to not become inert in its absence. There are always opportunities to generate momentum, find solutions and better ways of doing things, and then seek formal agreement.

DPC call their approach a ‘cultural adoption’ strategy, because it implants the culture of the Department with ideas and solutions in order to demonstrate the value of adopting different behaviours.

DPC are convinced that a strategy based on cultural adoption will produce more opportunities, build momentum, get support in difficult situations, and provide demand for further investment in creative initiatives. It won’t be compliance driven, and it will address issues in a way that appeals to executives.

DPC’s basic approach to delivering value to all involved is simple. They have bottom-line goals: get more customers, keep them happy enough to use their solutions, and convince them to see value in further business by minimising costs, improving operations, and improving efficiency. These translate into whole-of-department monetary and efficiency savings which are used to get further initiatives approved.

Their planning in this environment is flexible, with a strategic roadmap and vision for the end state, but a flexible approach to getting there.

Defining scope and measuring impact

DPC emphasise the importance of defining a “minimum viable solution” and making sure that it is absolutely delivered. This minimum viable solution is a commitment to resolving a problem, even if the bells and whistles are omitted initially.

When DPC implement a change, they compare it to the previous state’s defined baseline using both subjective responses from staff and operational data, then consider and prioritise what added value can be delivered subsequently. This iterative delivery concept is an essential part of the strategy. Although the solutions are not always “spot on”, DPC finds that the iterative process allows for testing solutions at a low risk with the possibility of revising them or even proceeding down a different path altogether.

Standardising where possible

DPC suggests that everything that is delivered should be standardised as much as possible. Each iteration should try to bring people’s behaviours closer to a standard by identifying commonalities in processes or systems, and then begin to execute certain steps the same way across these processes.

For DPC, this is also a way to try to re-use solutions for multiple problems. They speak to different groups, find the best idea, and try to sell it to everyone else. Once enough people agree it becomes a standard. Their standardised digital approval solution addressed fundamental problems equally well in the diverse fields of Cabinet, Policy, Advice, Ministerials, and HR without any process-specific alterations. Deviations from commonalities create permutations which are difficult to support in the long term, as process knowledge is gradually lost and the pressure on support and training becomes overwhelming.

DPC acknowledges there is a fine balance between delivering what users want, and getting everyone to work in a standardised way. They consult, engage, test with users, pilot and design for their needs, but they do not build a solution for “that one problem that those few users think is a good idea”. They also market, sell their ideas, negotiate, persuade and drive for compromises which allow them to sell standardised behaviours that support their broader strategy.

Brand

A critical element to the cultural adoption strategy is having a brand. For DPC, managing their EDRM brand markets their successes to the business and produces opportunities for projects.

DPC have developed a whole “EDRM Team experience” which is seamlessly integrated in the experience of working for the organisation. DPC’s EDRM team promote everything they do, transparently and realistically, and at times possibly to the point of annoyance, but they make sure staff are never uninformed. They explain that the approach incorporates change management, but it is also much more: change management happens when you’ve already won the business, while brand strategy happens outside of projects and is about winning and retaining business. A brand strategy is going beyond traditional change management to create personality, a reputation, a whole experience to associate with. It does not just happen during projects but before, between and after.

DPC has learnt that a brand can be damaged by the slightest failure in delivery, support, training, or performance of your team. They monitor their brand to have an overview of all of these critical components. It is not solely about numbers, as they know the perception of their team by others tells a lot about its overall performance. That is why they nurture their EDRM Team brand, and why they are so proud of their strong approval and engagement metrics.

The EDRM team uses their brand to drive engagement with their support mechanisms for new staff members and to drive awareness of new capability delivered by their projects. Their branding underpins this whole experience and makes them instantly recognisable. They take a multi-channelled approach to ongoing communications, including emails, news articles, [videos](#), classroom training, posters, face-to-face meetings, online guides in varying formats, and demonstrations. Throughout the duration of their projects staff receive regular communications explaining what’s happening, why, when and how it’s going to affect you. At the end of a project they show their colleagues what *they* themselves achieved, with easy-to-read graphs and statistics.

Tone of communications: A lot of the projects they deliver to staff are non-negotiable, they have to get involved. The tone of communications can help soften this blow. All of their communications are consistent, succinct, knowledgeable but also conversational and fun. They use the right language and try to avoid jargon.

Visual branding: Every single communication they send out is branded. They have branded templates for almost everything they do. Part of this consistent look and feel is achieved by having a branding guide. All of their projects have individual logos but you can tell they all belong together.

Personal interaction: They maintain a close connection with staff through a friendly EDRMS Helpdesk, professional and flexible training, and a community of practice made up of Branch Champions and Project Control Groups. Branch Champions are self-nominated go-to persons from each branch provided with additional training and resources, and Project Control Groups are made up of senior representatives from across the Department and/or subject matter experts.

The three elements – tone of communications, visual branding, and how they interact with people, work together to build a coherent brand that reflects the styles and suits the personalities of the DPC team. They have got to a point where people trust them, where they have created a community and a feeling that everyone is contributing to a common goal. They deliver on promises and support the changes they put in motion.

The team emphasises that you can create whatever brand you like: find an appropriate voice, be transparent, involve staff, provide them with feedback and support, and whatever you do, back it up with results.

The electronic approvals project

The strategy and conceptual framework behind the EDRMS culture at DPC have been successfully translated into delivered projects. Last year, when DPC was moving to a new building, the organisation needed to embrace a mobile and electronic working environment with activity based working, or “hot-desking”. The team was tasked with replacing the paper briefing approval process with an electronic approval process.

At the start of the project DPC was on the way to paper independence but critical processes were still paper based, printed and physically signed for approval. In particular, briefs and correspondence would go up and across the organisation for approval, getting re-printed with every change. There was an ambitious goal to get all the Deputy Secretaries to approve electronically, and an optimistic timetable to complete it within 8 months. There were many variations to approval processes their solution needed to solve. Policy approval, speech notes for the Premier, Events, Media releases, Ministerial correspondence, timesheets, Cabinet minutes, and other processes all needed to be understood.

The solution

The solution which was delivered is a standardised electronic approval for all approval processes. The team knew from previous experiences in other organisations that although

process-specific workflows might work, they only solved one small repeatable problem, are expensive to implement, and are increasingly complex as more processes are added.

The solution DPC delivered is device independent, and can be used on DPC laptops, smartphones or tablets, because decisions are usually made on the move. The interface itself is simple. Staff draft documents and then bring up a submission dialogue where they add the approval order and supporting documents. DPC chose email to be the interface since their executive and everyone else was already dependent on it. Any approver has the same set of actions. They can: progress (no changes); progress with changes if they've edited the documents; return to the previous approver; or cancel.

The Executive could use it without ever seeing or logging into the EDRMS, but the EDRMS is still the single source of truth and captures all approval metadata and comments. When the team saw a brief get approved by the Secretary, they had surpassed their project goal. Subsequent requests to go electronic with additional processes came from the Secretary himself and other senior staff. Now, this is how most things are approved at DPC.

DPC emphasises that just having a good tool or a product is not enough, it doesn't mean it's going to work in practice. The "If you build it they will come" theory does not work in our industry: you need people, process, *and* technology.

Project delivery challenges

Quality execution of the delivery is difficult and requires a lot of tenacity. The DPC team emphasized there is a risk that delivery may sound easy with this case study. The main challenges, which the case study doesn't cover in detail, are:

- Extensive analysis and design activities.
- The major re-work and redesign required to support the system.
- Challenges with the business and vendor.

Change management

The team used the established EDRM brand, and relationships within the Department to form a Project Control Group made up of senior staff members who are very time poor. These decision makers helped to identify and solve problems and were involved in each iteration of improvement.

The phased rollout stages were calculated based on data gathered from the business analysis. Aware of the limitations at each phase, they chose to get the minimum viable solution working and roll out additional features later on. They monitored the workflows closely, watching every process ticking along, immediately gaining insights into the Department. They provided close communication and extensive support until they achieved a critical mass of people doing the right thing.

Once some key decisions were made about the design and the delivery dates, the change management stream was expanded and the solution was taken to existing established Branch Champions, then the rest of DPC.

- The first introduction of "EDM CaseFlow" was a DPC wide compulsory information session.
- Fun is legitimately important for engagement, so they presented a fictitious and ridiculous approval example of getting a pool built on the roof.
- They wanted to sell the vision rather than get stuck in detail and open it up for people to pick holes in a specific business process.

Over 350 hours in total were devoted to change management. This was a necessary piece to a successful solution. They created posters, [YouTube videos](#), sent emails, set up intranet pages, and established an e-learning module. The system was discussed and demonstrated at every branch meeting and executive meeting. In total they had face-to-face contact with over three quarters of DPC staff.

Measuring the impact

The solution exposed information around the approval process and DPC used this data to drive business reform such as improving the on-time performance of briefs. The project itself also captured some interesting statistics:

- Project delivered on-time and on-budget.
- 100% of approvals at the Department are conducted electronically.
- About 500 approvals are submitted per month.
- DPC are completing the core process of briefing approvals at least 36% faster, based on comparing a 3 month period of last years data to the same 3 month period this year.

The EDRM team has visibility of what the Department is doing and staff have visibility of each other's actions during the approval process. Each branch has different workloads and different priorities. The project has been handed over to business-as-usual, and has continued to open up other opportunities, most recently around reporting to the Premier.

Lessons learned

For DPC, strategy, brand and delivery are elements that cannot be separated. They emphasize:

Delivery underpins everything. It means standing by your promises. There have been occasions when they ended up working long hours or dedicating weekends to getting things done. This ability to deliver is enabled through thorough, but flexible planning, understanding the value of minimum viable solutions, using iterative improvement approaches, and standardising and reusing solutions. It is a fundamental aspect of their brand.

Being supportive, pro-active and helpful is crucial. Their brand is built around the entire experience: how staff are on-boarded, how support and assistance is offered, the education that is available, the suggestions they make, the concessions they make, how projects are run, the engagement experience, your transparency, and your ability to seek and take feedback.

Your brand is like your personality, and cannot be faked. Traditional change management forms only part of this holistic approach. The overall strategy of the DPC program is only there

to support this environment. They behave like a consultancy; they try to earn business by meeting the needs of those around them and demonstrating value in their existence.

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<http://www.records.nsw.gov.au/recordkeeping/advice/designing-implementing-and-managing-systems/case-studies/digital-processes-at-department-of-premier-and-cabinet>

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