

The Challenge with Legacy ED(&)RM Solutions

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By Paul Ricketts

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Let me start by saying that I'm not in the business of knocking solutions from any vendor within the Enterprise Information Management space. All commercial, off-the-shelf solutions have a place within the global market and all suit particular requirements and purposes. Within the EIM industry, we are experience quite a lot of change in the way that we are required to store and manage records effectively, how we respond to discovery requests and how we meet regulatory requirements placed on us by government, industry or other authorities.

My five observations, and this are mine and not representative of the company I work for, are as follows.

- Records management is no longer a single-dimensional concept.
- Thinking about electronic records in a physical manner is no longer appropriate for the organisation
- Why do only a small percentage of the workforce have records management responsibility?
- All business information has a record context so why are only a small percentage of records managed effectively?
- Whilst the end-state of the record is important, its journey from creation through review, approval to retention and ultimate destruction and all the history that should be retained is critical for a modern records solution.

So let me explain what I mean in a little more detail.

Multi-Dimensional Records Management

Traditionally, the process of formally declaring anything as a record involved categorisation against a file-plan. This hierarchy defined the categories of records for an organisation and typically required 'expert' knowledge of both the file-plan and the rationale behind filing a document in a specific place.

The process of formally declaring a record can become complex and as such, most users in the organisation simply fail to declare records properly. Additionally, the filing of a record in multiple places on the file-plan is usually frowned upon plus usually results in duplication of the record itself (think about multiple copies of a physical record living in multiple record containers in a warehouse)

Today, most records represent multiple contexts at the organisational level. For example, a supplier invoice received will be categorised as a record for this financial year. However, what if there is a requirement to categorise against a project, a supplier, a human-resource or against an item of equipment delivered by the supplier?

What if all of these concepts were important to the business and required different retention and disposition policies to be applied with quite-difference execution dates? Additionally, in today's digital age records can be represented by both physical and electronic mediums - how are these managed discretely as records by the organisation?

The key to solving these modern records-management challenges lie with addressing the file-plan concept. Either the organisation needs to accept that records-management becomes even-more complex requiring multiple-classifications to be made against the file-plan OR a different way of classifying records needs to be adopted.

The core principal behind the file-plan was to allow controlled metadata to be applied to a record in order to aide retrieval in the event of a discovery activity. This was historically driven simply because a record was typically physical - piece of paper - and no real way of automatically extracting anything useful from the physical document existed. If it is accepted that the file-plan approach as challenges from a broad-organisational perspective and that a different approach is required, then how can this be achieved?

Digital Records are Not Kept in a Physical Warehouse

The cool thing about electronic records is that you don't need to consider the physical warehouse management requirements - storage is pretty-much limitless for most organisations today and a modern RM solution deals with the multi-faceted policy concept without the need to duplicate files.

Of course, for some organisations there remains a need to maintain something physical either in the short or long-term. The management of a record that exists both physically and electronically is often referred to as 'hybrid-records-management'. Again, a modern RM solution can easily deal with a record that exists in two mediums (physical and electronic) and through the multi-policy approach - can apply and manage each independently allowing short-term retention of the physical record and longer-term retention of the digital record(s).

Removing the complexities of both the file-plan and the physical warehouse container principals allows the business to define the context around which records are stored and maintained.

Everybody Should Manage Their Own Records

Business users need to be responsible for corporate records management! It shouldn't just be the responsibility of the formal records custodians within the organisation. There are challenges however in trying to get the broader user-base involved in the process of managing records and a level of automation is clearly required to do so. So, how do we make this happen?

Any change to the user-experience, the applications, processes or procedures involved in the creation of corporate documents is going to require some management. Any implementation that reduces this change is going to be more successful than one that disrupts the user's daily activities.

Gartner introduced the term 'Pace Layering' a few years ago and this introduces three terms; Systems of Record, Systems of Differentiation and Systems of Innovation. In the author's opinion, a fourth term - Systems of Engagement - becomes highly relevant when considering any implementation of any system to a user-base.

Within an enterprise content management implementation, particularly nowadays with the wide usage of systems such as SharePoint, the Systems of Engagement already in place should be minimally disrupted. Requiring a user to enter multiple metadata values or classifying a document against a file-plan is disruptive and the more you ask of a user - the more likely they are to reject the change in totality!

Records Management should be a non-complex and natural business function where all users in the organisation are empowered to own the records function - albeit through 'invisible' automated systems that drive the application of the right policies with minimal user change.

By leveraging some common document characteristics - its type, its location, the user, their line of business and basic metadata, rules within the system of record supporting the user-facing system of engagement can determine the right policies to apply and the way in which these policies will be enacted. Furthermore, through analysis of the content of the document, more granular classification can occur allowing a more-accurate application of policy.

Of course, automation to this degree requires some thought and work at the time of implementation and beyond but at least by applying the Gartner model - an organisation should only be required to do this once and apply consistently to any 'document' from any source. Sources in this context cover any application or system that requires the management of unstructured information.

All Records Should be Effectively Managed

To enable a more effective method of managing corporate records and ensuring that a higher percentage of records are retained and more users are engaged in the process there are six simple guidelines to follow:

Consider and manage the record throughout its journey and across its different states. I'm finishing writing this article on a plane in the middle of a 12-day business trip taking in Dubai, London and Hong Kong before returning home to Sydney. Imagine if during this journey I carried a camera (ok, let say an iPhone) with me at all times - to every meeting, on every plane, every car journey, every tourist attraction, every meal etc. Imagine if I didn't take a single photo during the entire 12-days but waited until I arrived home on the 12th-day and took a selfie at my front door. We are all getting old and someday, our memory is going to start to get fuzzy and eventually fade away. Imagine me in my 80s sitting in the old-people's home, rambling on about the fantastic trip I took in April 2015 and the only thing I had to prove I went was a faded image of me on my doorstep! You might be laughing or at the very least, smiling right now but the truth is - this is the way of the vast majority of records management systems in place today and most likely the very way that your organisation thinks about records management!

Remember that electronic records aren't kept in a physical warehouse. Strangely, this isn't as obvious to many people as it might seem. The author has been engaged with many organisations over the past 20 years and is still constantly surprised when he hears somebody talking about 'storing the Word-Document in a container'. Google doesn't represent information in containers and the whole wide world manages to find information so why are corporations still allowing a small team of people to insist that files, boxes and shelves are an appropriate way of managing electronic records? If a record is managed through effective metadata (automated or manually applied) and is indexed appropriately AND the various records policies enacted based upon broad business requirements there is NO NEED to think about physical warehouse requirements!

Enable record automation where possible and applicable. An easy one - asking a user to manually categorise a record against a file plan is simply, plainly and obviously NOT GOING TO WORK. Letting the user continue to work with their currently systems and application and not implementing any change to their user-experience WILL WORK but you have to enable the automation 'under-the-

covers'. Delivering an automated RM capability under all of your 'systems of engagement', delivering the consistent and accurate application of policies to all information will bring the organisation immense benefit and if you're the disruptive leader driving this you will be a hero and deserve to wear a cape and your underwear outside of your trousers!

Seamlessly integrate your records systems with your systems of engagement. If you get this right, and don't get me wrong it's going to take some work to do so, you'll look back and think to yourself 'how did we ever get it so wrong in the first place!'. Then you'll remember what your legacy RM solution provider told you when you bought the software in the first place and smile to yourself quietly!

Consider how you are managing your non-documentary records, e.g. Social Media. As an organisation you publish information to your websites, to Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and a whole other list of different online channels. What you say through these channels is equally as important as the information you attempt to manage within your current record processes. Of course, from your marketing team you are highly unlikely to receive an internal envelope with their latest Tweet nicely printed out on a sheet of A4 paper for your records manager to nicely categorise against their file plan and store away for evermore in your off-site warehouse!

Educate your user community on the importance of good record-keeping practices. Of course, if you've read this article you'll already realise that this is completely unnecessary if you get your record keeping right across the organisation. Users should not have to think about record-keeping practices - it should happen seamlessly without any change to their daily lives!

Retain the Record's Journey - Not Just the Destination

A record simply represents the end state of a piece of information. Dependent upon the system used to create the record - itself can be simplistic or complex in structure detailing minimal supporting metadata or 'everything' ever known about the records journey. Of course, the complexity of information retained in support of the record is highly dependent upon the systems and processes followed to create and manage the record across its entire lifecycle - from initial creation, through review and approval, publication, access, retirement and ultimately - destruction.

The more systems used across this journey and the more people involved in the processes PLUS the added dimension of metadata requirements leads to a potentially massive change in the user-experience should the organisation want to do more in the corporate-records arena. As previously described, where an automation-centric approach to records management can be adopted - minimising user-change in the process - it becomes much more feasible to capture a richer set of supporting information about the record than simply the fact that it exists and the dates when it is to be destroyed (typical of the information currently held in the vast majority of legacy records management solutions!).

The beauty of this approach is that not-only is the document managed as a corporate record - its entire lifecycle can be captured and maintained dynamically allowing the history and usage to be retrieved in the event of a discovery process taking place. The use of a semi-structured file format such as XML easily allows this to take place and in-fact, authorities such as the Victorian Electronic Record Standard has documented an appropriate schema for over a decade.

Legacy records management solutions don't really provide the capability to extend to this level of dynamic management and this is where a hybrid-approach to the top-to-bottom records keeping requirements can really play a role. A dynamic record repository function maintains the record dynamically through its useful lifecycle and at the end of this process, the entire records can be passed to the legacy RM system to meet any existing record keeping policies already in place. The additional value provided through this approach PLUS the fact that all users and all records are now maintained properly should be clearly recognisable!

Summary

We are all guilty of making records management really hard to achieve across the entire organisation. By just accepting what our internal 'experts' tell us about record-keeping and not challenging the arguments that have been put forward for many years - we are effectively preventing change from taking place and suffering from the inability to deliver 'Modern Records Management' to the organisation.

Consider that typically, only 5% of corporate records are formally retained and that a lower percentage of users in YOUR organisation understand how records-management works and its value you'll realise the importance of change in this area. Also, you'll understand some of the risks your organisation currently faces should it undergo some legal eDiscovery exercise or face any other litigious event. Modernising your organisation's approach to records management will go a long way to improving the percentage of records managed across your business and significantly reduce your risks.

*Paul Ricketts is technology program director and strategic architect for Oracle Asia-Pacific.
paul_ricketts@me.com*

Submitted by: Alan Kong - PROV