

Automating Records and Information Management in Your Organization – (I)

What is Automation?

Automation can be defined as the use of machines or systems to perform tasks normally performed or controlled by people manually.

Many functions in life can be automated, including washing clothes or dishes using washing machines or dishwashers, transporting goods using cars or trucks, or adding up lists of numbers using calculators. In this article, automation refers to the use of computers to manage the administrative and information processing tasks in organisations.

If used wisely, computers can assist organisations or records and information management personnel in managing records better to ensure their continued value as evidence. Automation can help organisations implement authentic and reliable record-keeping practices, through the improved tracking of records and information through their life cycle as well as the consistent application of records schedules and descriptive standards. Maintaining evidence through authentic and reliable records is a cornerstone of good business practice and helps ensure a valuable record for the society.

What Should Be Automated?

The range of technology applications and functions available can make it difficult to select a particular technological solution to a records and information management challenge. The question is not whether records management functions can be automated. Many functions can be automated if the resources are available. But it is important to determine if automation is warranted. Two key questions must be asked:

1. Should a specific records management function be automated at this time?
2. How should a particular records management function be automated?

All records and information management functions should be fully functional in a manual system before attempts are made to automate them. Automating an inefficient process will not transform it into an effective one. If done correctly, however, automation can not only improve records and information management functions but can also make it possible to undertake activities that were too complicated or time consuming to be done in the past on a regular basis.

Because automating an inefficient and ineffective manual process will not help an organisation achieve its objectives, some organisations should consider systems analysis and business process re-engineering in anticipation of automation.

It is also important to consider the resources available and staff commitment required before commencing an automation project. Financial resources are important, but people are an even more critical element in any automation process. When considering automation, the key stakeholders need to be identified.

These stakeholders may include government officials who rely on institution to maintain their records and supply information or return specific files when requested. Other stakeholders are the citizens who depend on the records and information to be able to preserve and locate important records (such as property files). Researchers may be another key stakeholder group; they can be directly affected by the way information or records are made available to them.

Whether an automation programme succeeds or fails often depends on the support it receives from stakeholders. Automation may entail redesigning work processes and thus changing people's jobs or the way services are offered. It is crucial to assess people's capacity for change in their work environment and to prepare them for that change. Staff may have to be trained in computer skills. Similarly, users may have to be given guidance about the way automated systems work if they are to be expected to use the technology themselves.

Reasons for Automation

Automation should be viewed as a tool to facilitate daily operations and planning in an organisation. If implemented well, automation can increase staff efficiency, perform routine tasks automatically and analyse data more quickly than could be done manually. Manual information systems may not be fast enough or sophisticated enough to meet growing user demands as well as the higher expectations and standards brought about in society by increased computerisation. If people find that they can access information in one office or agency using computers, they will soon come to expect other offices to provide the same level of service.

Public and private sector organisations increasingly rely upon computers and information technology to deliver their services and programmes more efficiently. Almost any records-related activity can be automated in some fashion. For example, word processing can be used for correspondence, inventory development and report generation. Spreadsheets can be used to manage budgets or track project expenditures. Databases can maintain information about staff or about records and information.

The pressures to automate are great. In this age of 'instant' information, there is an increasing demand for speedy access to information, contents, records and archives. Furthermore, existing manual systems may lead to duplication of effort and repetition of work. Manual systems can be time consuming, costly, inflexible and prone to human error. However, computerisation is only effective if the proper analysis and planning is completed prior to the purchase and implementation of new technology. Computers alone are not a solution for poor processes or a lack of standards in the management of records and information. For example, a computer cannot be a replacement for, or an alternative to, a properly designed classification system. On the other hand, if such a classification system is in place prior to computerisation, the computer can automate it, facilitate access and provide a faster search mechanisms for it and permit the assignment of relevant file numbers to paper records quickly and efficiently.

Following are some reasons an organisation might choose to automate its records and information management functions, or indeed any of its functions.

- accuracy of information and calculations
- speedy retrieval of information
- reliability of information once input
- increased ability to manipulate data once input
- ability to ensure greater accuracy and consistency in the performance of routine tasks
- large capacity for storage of information
- accessibility of information
- expandability of computer systems
- flexibility of computer systems
- cost efficiency of operations
- better utilisation of personnel
- savings in space and equipment
- instantaneous updating
- multiple simultaneous access to information
- new approaches to work processes.

Automation also assists in eliminating repetitious work, such as typing new file labels and index cards. Computers can print labels automatically, update indexes regularly, produce reports based on data already entered into the computer, and otherwise reduce time and increase efficiency. Personnel can then focus their work on more significant tasks.

The computerisation of some tasks offers much more flexibility. For example, the computer makes it possible to organise and maintain an index with several searchable 'fields' or attributes of information. As a result, the computer provides increased points of access to information. This access can facilitate the location of items for users who may not be aware of the exact terminology for an item.

In addition, the computer permits the maintenance and updating of finding aids, classification manuals, and indexes with relative ease. Changes can be input quickly into the database and can be immediately reflected in a printout. As long as more than one computer is available, it is also possible for records and information management employees to access the database simultaneously. Thus, staff members at remote storage locations can see new and revised information immediately and not have to wait until they are physically at the main records and information management office.

Space savings can be achieved through the use of computers. For example, computers can be programmed to remind users of retention and disposal deadlines, ensuring records are transferred or destroyed on schedule. In an archival setting, computers can also be used to make finding aids more consistent and available to users in remote locations as well as on the premises. Computers may also reduce the need for some office supplies and equipment, saving costs in the long run.

Networked computers allow increased connectivity to other governmental agencies, as well as to records professionals throughout the world. Intranets can connect the records and information management organisation to governmental agencies so that records-related

questions can be answered quickly. Through the Internet, records professionals can locate professional resources and find model policies, procedures and manuals from other similar institutions to assist them in programme development. They can also communicate more easily with their colleagues, encouraging their professional growth.

Uses of Automation

Automated technologies can be used for a wide range of records management functions. However, this does not mean all such operations should necessarily be computerised. The decision about what to automate, what not to automate and how to prioritise functions in an automation process is considered below.

Potential records-related functions to which technology can be applied include:

- administrative tasks such as correspondence, personnel management, accounting, or reporting
- classification and listing of current records
- printing file labels
- scheduling of current records
- location and tracking of current and semi-current records and boxes
- information about authorised users of current and semi-current records
- identification of records for disposal to records centres or archives
- management of physical space and storage for current records, semi-current records or archives
- management of deposits in records centres
- acquisition and accessioning of archives
- donor files in archives
- preservation assessments
- reference and retrieval of archives
- registration of users and researchers
- provision of finding aids or descriptive information about records or archives
- production of management information about the records and information service.

Another way to consider the possible applications of a computer system is to examine 'problems' or difficulties encountered by the organisation and evaluate whether they can be facilitated or improved with automation. Sometimes problems are systemic and simply automating a process will not solve the underlying issue. Before computerisation, the 'difficult' process should be analysed and perhaps re-engineered (as stated below).

However, automation has been used successfully to address such common records and information management challenges as the following:

- The records classification function is slow, inconsistent and out of date.
- Key word lists have become obsolete and are difficult to keep up to date.

- Making up new files takes too long.
- Manually managed tasks such as creating or searching file indexes, card indexes or lists are time consuming.
- The manual system does not facilitate the addition and deletion of file index information.
- Records have been mislaid because they have not been regularly tracked around the ministry or department.
- Records schedules are difficult to keep track of and disposal dates often pass without records personnel realising this fact.
- Classification manuals and users' guides are quickly outdated and personnel may be working with different versions.
- Personal filing systems are kept to compensate for the lack of reliability in the central registry system.
- File monitoring and control are not carried out regularly.
- Preservation assessments are not updated regularly.
- Certain tasks are duplicated, such as preparing file jacket labels, index entries or file classification manuals.
- The large volume of information available makes it difficult to collect, organise and link documents using manual systems.
- Management reports are not available on a regular basis and statistics for these reports are hard to compile.
- Resources in organisations are not sufficient to meet user demands.
- Overtime costs are increasingly necessary to support the system.
- Tasks are repetitious and monotonous, causing morale difficulties.

If the identification and analysis of systemic problems and an ensuing business process re-engineering is not done prior to automation, this can lead to greater problems in the implementation and management of the new technologies.

What are often perceived as automation problems arise not from the implementation of computer technologies but instead from insufficient analysis and planning prior to their implementation. Problems also arise when the processes being automated are poorly designed in the first place. Major problems in automating records and archives functions include the following:

- People may expect too much of the automation system and be disappointed if it is not 'perfect'.
- Insufficient training of personnel using the system can result in morale problems and in data that is not reliable.
- People may not be willing to adapt to the methods, such as standardisation of terminology (required to use automated systems), making compliance difficult.
- Poorly planned systems may not serve organisational requirements adequately and so be considered poor substitutes for previous manual systems.
- Vague or imprecise systems will not serve needs well and may become obsolete quickly.
- Idiosyncratic processes will lead to a failure in automation if they are not altered, as

computers require high levels of accuracy and consistency.

- Continual changes in the organisation's needs and requirements may make automated systems obsolete if poorly planned.

Next week we shall continue with this Topic 'Automating Information Management in Your Organization' by looking at how we can better manage records and information through automation, till then, do have a wonderful weekend.

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