

IMPLEMENTING A RECORDS AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM – Part I

Compliance, litigation and electronic records are just some of the factors that have organizations scrambling to get their records management program in order. For many organizations, the answer is software. But choosing the right software solution can be a difficult and confusing process and organisations often want to know the best way to select a software solution.

The answer is to take a step back and recognize that software is simply a tool in your larger Records and Information Management (RIM) solution's arsenal. Simply buying and installing software won't make you compliant, but when used as part of a comprehensive RIM program, it can help you get to compliance and much more. Only focusing on the electronic records can be limiting, because paper records continue to make up a large part of active file collections. So when you define how your records management software fits into the bigger records management picture, then you can make an informed decision that will be the right fit for your organization.

A Solid Foundation: Classification & Retention

Every good RIM program must start with an effective classification system. Classification of business activities acts as a powerful tool to assist the conduct of business and in many of the processes involved in the management of records including:

- Providing linkages between individual records which accumulate to provide a continuous record of activity
- Ensuring records are named in a consistent manner over time
- Assisting in the retrieval of records relating to a particular function or activity
- Determining security protection and access appropriate for sets of records
- Allocating user permissions for access to, or action on, particular groups of records
- Distributing responsibility for management of particular sets of records
- Distributing records of action
- Determining appropriate retention periods and disposition actions for records

Classifications systems are established through a series of process steps that include interviewing business areas to establish and analyze business activities and records. Following the interviews, an assessment of the existing records is completed. Finally a classification reflecting the functions, activities and records that are created by those activities is completed. It is the classification system that provides the basis for compliance, risk management, retention periods, security safeguards and other related issues.

Once a classification system is in place, retention schedules must be applied to each activity and record type within your environment. Records retention establishes how long an organization needs to keep its records. It is based on operational business needs, legal, and regulatory requirements. Retention schedules specify how long records must be kept as they progress through their organizational life cycle, including whether records are ultimately destroyed or archived.

Records and Information Management Software

With the classification and retention systems built, the real work begins. Each document must be evaluated to determine whether it is evidence of business activity and who is responsible for storing and maintaining the record. The classification system is then applied to the record, assisting in its organization and determination of its retention characteristics.

How Does RIM Software Help?

A good records management software solution incorporates your classification structure into the software. It uses the classification structure to apply retention rules and guidelines to records identified and stored within the database. As users store new content, classifications are selected and the software automatically links the retention rules to that particular piece of content. If retention rules change to a particular classification level, the designated user simply applies the new rule(s) to the classification level. Upon completing this process, the software will automatically update all records with the new change. This is an important consideration when selecting RIM software as millions of records can be associated with a single retention rule change.

Software & Compliance: Managing the Lifecycle Process

Ultimately, building the classification system, applying retention and incorporating those principles into your RIM software helps you to manage the record lifecycle process. RIM software will trigger dates for records to go from active to inactive and from inactive to destruction. RIM software logs all of these activities to transaction logs so you can review activity and demonstrate, in the case of an audit, that policies and procedures were consistently applied. In the event of litigation, during discovery, you can use the software to perform a search for content identified as required by a discovery motion. You must be able to place a "legal hold" on all of that content applicable to the discovery motion overriding the applied retention rules until the hold is removed. This protects you from further exposure by destroying documents that should be available by order.

Work With an Organisation with RIM Knowledge

Part of the process in choosing software should be carefully selecting a provider with a comprehensive knowledge of records management and its application to RIM software tools. Because the effective long-term use of your software is tied to having the right records management structure in place, working with an organisation that understands both records and software is critical. A company that only sells software but lacks knowledge of records management ultimately will be challenged in assisting you in applying the software to effectively manage your organization's governance requirements.

What a RIM expert should offer you

- An expert should take a holistic approach to the RIM software question.
- Should first look at your entire records situation, paper and electronic, and from there determine how the software will fit into the organization
- Determine what the business issues are, which workflows need to be solved, and then customize a solution to fit your organizations requirements.
- Ensure that the RIM software to be implemented is robust and flexible enough to deal with any records management issue, either paper or electronic, that your organization may have.

Finally, a RIM expert should be skilled at building functional classification systems for you based upon ISO15489 standard and researching and applying retention to the classification. Once your RIM software is purchased, RIM software business analyst should effectively apply records management principles and processes in building file structures, naming conventions and applying retention effectively within RIM Software.

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