

Case study 1: New problems require new solutions

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INFORMATION MANAGEMENT initiatives have encountered difficulties in establishing and maintaining traction. This case study provides context and a discussion of why many of the solutions attempted in the past haven't worked; and, after restating the problem, it suggests two steps to take to build a broader internal coalition, and to design and implement a solution.

What's the context?

Before attempting to restate the problem, it is first important to set the context within which the problem arises.

One factor is the current information glut, and the rate of growth of that glut.² This, in turn, is compounded by the accelerating rate of change in available technologies used in and around the workplace, such as instant messages, text messages, wikis, blogs, unified voice messaging, Facebook and YouTube.

A second factor is the legal environment. Both with the amendment of the US Federal Rules of Civil Procedure (which was effective in December 2006) and with various court rulings in the context of electronic discovery, the consequences of not getting this right have become more serious and visible. Further, there is ever-increasing attention being paid to privacy rights and personal data security, driven in part by legislative developments in Europe.

The third factor is the individual user perspective. In the absence of standardised,

simple processes, users have been given near complete control of not only the creation and transmission of information on their corporate computer, but also the manner in which that information is stored and retained. In the absence of effective corporate control of these processes, the individual users have taken the 'personal' in 'personal computer' to heart, and often treat the information they create in the course of their work as 'their' information, rather than as the corporation's information.

The fourth factor is the failure to fully appreciate the role of information in the organisation, underlying as it does every operational, financial and personnel decision the company makes, and the speed at which it makes them. In the absence of timely access to accurate and complete information, how can the decision-makers make the right decisions? Corporate information needs to be managed with the same rigour as is applied to cash, people, intellectual property, reputation and physical equipment.

Why haven't other solutions worked?

Apart from the struggle in agreeing what the problem is, reasons for the lack of success include:

- A perception that all that needs to be addressed is a subset of the corporation's information, that is, its 'records';
- A perception that this is primarily a compliance issue;
- A perception that this can be solved by implementing the next new technological silver bullet (a view often advanced by

consultants and software vendors, not all of whom are disinterested and objective);

- A belief that someone else in the corporation is managing this;
- The assignment of this problem to the 'too-hard' or 'too-big' pile; and
- A failure to recognise that this will often require a major change management initiative to fundamentally alter the corporate culture and accepted behaviours.

Restating the problem

The problem is not the failure of the workforce to comply with the corporation's internal policies – that is merely a symptom. The problem is the failure to manage the corporation's information as an asset, with the same rigour as cash, people or physical equipment. The solution requires a fundamental change in the corporation's relationship with its information.

A proposed solution

Here is a proposed two-step approach to address and, hopefully, solve the problem. First, redefine 'information' and 'information lifecycle' to include a broader range of stakeholders. Second, create and implement an information framework to address the usual suspects: governance, people, process and technology.

Step one: redefine the key terms

The word 'information' has different meanings, depending upon your audience. The professionals in your information technology department view 'information' as synonymous with 'data' and often look to deploy a solution, addressing either document management or enterprise content management. The lawyers, on the other hand, view 'information' as being defined by the scope of the discovery

obligations under the applicable rules of civil procedure, and want a solution that can help them quickly preserve, protect, collect and produce responsive information in litigation. The information and records professionals want a system that will automatically classify all documents that need to be retained according to the applicable records-retention schedule. Still, others may be focused on their own independent solutions for collecting business intelligence, management information or CI.

The definition of 'information' therefore, needs to be broad enough to incorporate the interests of these diverse stakeholders. The definition cannot be limited to mere documentary information, whether on paper or in digital form, as that would not cover conversations in the hallway, phone calls, and information accessed on the internet – all of which may be important for the ongoing operation of the business enterprise. In other enterprises, the definition needs to be broad enough to include samples of production runs and hard evidence of product, service or equipment failure.

Next, redefine the 'information lifecycle'. This, like 'information', has slightly varying definitions depending upon the audience. Normally included in the core definition of the 'information lifecycle' are some or all of the following processes:

- Information creation, receipt and access;
- Creating drafts and versions;
- Transmission or transfer of information;
- Storage of information, including any associated organisation structure, index or taxonomy;
- Collaboration within the team;
- Searching and finding information;
- Segregation of different types of information, such as confidential

business information or personal data, or secret information such as trade secrets, pre-patent information, and information the disclosure of which would have a material impact upon stock value, or that would compromise the attorney client privilege;

- Validation of the information as accurate;
- Protection of the information from alteration or destruction in the event of a natural disaster;
- Maintaining and updating the information to keep it current, relevant and accurate;
- Reusing the information, and thereby leveraging its value by avoiding the creation of new wheels; and
- Disposal or destruction of the information at the end of its useful life.

While this list is fairly comprehensive, it misses two aspects that need to be addressed: the pre-creation decisions and the harvest decisions.

Before the information is captured, either for retention or transmission, a decision needs to be made as to the manner of capturing or transmitting that information, so that the information is placed in a container whose permanence is consistent with the importance of the information itself. Thus, using e-mail to set up lunch dates could well result in the near archival permanence of that information, notwithstanding its negligible long-term value.

After the container has been selected, the next issue is the actual content of the communication itself. The business people have an interest in the clear, concise, complete and accurate communication, and understanding of that information; and the lawyers have an interest in making sure that people do not create any unnecessary legal liability by an unfortunate choice of words.

Additionally, at the other end of the 'information lifecycle', it is important to address harvesting the key learnings and sharing, both within and outside the team. This also helps when bringing new employees on board, but first you need to harvest the information when former employees leave or retire, making the appropriate distinction between the portions of the 'knowledge' that continues to be useful, and the portions that don't.

By defining the term 'information' broadly, and extending the information lifecycle in both directions, you can engage a broader group of potential stakeholders. Linking them together in a common enterprise can provide you the organisational mass necessary to support a change of this dimension.

Step two: create and implement an information framework

The second step is to take a conventional framework approach to solving an operational issue. This normally has four components:

- Governance;
- People;
- Processes; and
- Technology.

Under the governance umbrella, the management of information as an asset needs to be owned by the business, with oversight from the top by a designated senior executive. Having ownership reside in a functional, as opposed to operational, discipline may have an impact; it may be better to have this ownership in finance, which is responsible for cash and accounting, and Sarbanes-Oxley compliance, than in, say, the information technology organisation, which does not normally have line responsibility.

The coalition to support the governance initiative would include the following roles:

- Business owner – this is, after all, an operational issue that needs to be owned and managed by the business;
- Information and records – to provide expertise in information organisation, and to act as custodians of the records-retention schedules and information management processes;
- Legal – provides expertise in the compliance area, with primary interest in overall regulatory compliance, and in responding effectively and efficiently to discovery and investigation requests. There also exists ongoing interest in content control, and proper and effective business communication, and in having a consistent approach to retention and destruction;
- Information technology – providing expertise in the current and emerging information architectures, storage and transmission; and also charged with providing support for maintaining business continuity;
- Finance – interest in accurate and complete transactional records, and ensuring compliance with Sarbanes-Oxley;
- Tax;
- Audit; and
- Compliance.

Also under the governance umbrella would be the development of strategy and implementation plans, and identifying what information the organisation has and where it has it. Once that information inventory has been compiled, then the critical information can be identified and the appropriate controls applied. Governance would also be responsible for drafting and enforcing policy, and, of course, securing the necessary funding.

In the people dimension, a fundamental requirement would be the establishment of clear lines of authority and responsibility. It is important to ensure that the people in charge of the various aspects of managing the corporation's information as an asset have the appropriate competencies. To operate effectively in this area requires relative fluency in:

- Records management;
- Legal;
- Information technology; and
- General business awareness.³

An additional, but often overlooked, requirement is an appreciation of the issue from the user perspective.

While it is important to have overarching policies and procedures, it is equally important to have simple sets of guidelines to provide the first-level teams with the ability to establish their own procedures. The team leaders are the first effective point of control above the individual users. The necessary processes need to be integrated within the broader organisation, with the requisite training, monitoring and enforcement. These processes also need to deal with business continuity and disaster recovery, as well as the application and removal of legal holds, the harvest of information when employees transfer within the organisation or leave, and the complete destruction of the information at the end of its useful life.

Finally, while many companies have attempted to start with technology (often at the urging of software vendors), it is merely an enabler, and not the ultimate solution. Technology is necessary to address storage, access, collaboration and search functionality, and can be useful as well in providing training. Unless the problem is

not having the right technology, the starting point needs to be elsewhere.

Conclusion

Albert Einstein is reported to have said: "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."⁴

By restating the problem as the failure to manage corporate information as an asset, you can enroll a wider and stronger coalition, and thereby create the opportunity to design and implement a solution that is at once both broader and deeper. All that is required is to fundamentally change the nature of the corporate conversation about, and relationship with, the full range of the corporation's information.

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References

1. The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of BP p.l.c., its subscribers or affiliates.
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4. See: <http://www.empyrean.ca/words/quotes/einstein.html> (accessed 30 March 2008).