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The EDRMS Opportunity: Demonstrating the Value of Records Management

Leveraging Meta Data, Information Architecture and Taxonomy in EDRMS Implementations

As records and information management professionals, we are acutely aware of the challenges of demonstrating our relevance within our respective organizations. From getting executive buy-in and securing resources to user-adoption and rolling out new programs, the onus is always on us to show why we matter in terms of business results.

This age-old problem has been compounded by the proliferation of electronic records and more specifically, the increasing trend towards Electronic Document and Records Management Software (EDRMS).

The issue lies in the fact that EDRMS implementations are typically owned by IT departments. IT professionals often assume that RIM professionals' work is limited to paper records, and fail to involve them in the deployment of electronic information management systems, or perform cursory consultations far too late in the development process to incorporate meaningful feedback and involvement. This can be to the detriment of RIM programs and sometimes, the end-user experience.

RIM professionals, for our part, can find it difficult to clearly articulate the value that we bring to EDRMS implementations, especially when these are framed as IT projects rather than RIM projects.

A New Approach: Leveraging Meta Data, Information Architecture and Taxonomy Skills

The good news is that there is an increasing recognition within organizations that for true electronic content management, expertise in meta data, information architecture (IA), and taxonomy are required from the beginning of a project. This is where RIM professionals truly shine, and how we can remain relevant to our IT and business partners. Records management practices and processes, regardless of the record format, are based on meta data, IA, and taxonomy.

These three pillars of the profession are essential skills that RIM professionals can bring to an EDRMS implementation (regardless of who owns the project) and the way we can demonstrate and our knowledge, expertise, and value.

In other words, the ability to apply IA, meta data, and taxonomy to an electronic system (regardless of whether that system manages digital, hybrid, or hard copy only records) is one way for RIM professionals to remain relevant in an increasingly competitive business environment.

So whether you're using sophisticated software, something more basic, or trying to make a shared drive work (you brave soul), rather than focusing on building from your existing paper-based file plan, start with meta data, information architecture (IA), and taxonomy as your foundational elements. These will help you move to the next level of content management, manage all your content regardless of format, and take advantage of the software you're using, rather than trying to replicate your records office in your electronic space. This demonstrates to IT and business that your RIM program is able to understand and take advantage of electronic tools – and that it's about so much more than boxes in the basement!

RIM's Foundational Elements:
1. Meta data
2. Information Architecture
3. Taxonomy

Solving The Right Problem

Because records format changes have driven process changes – i.e. paper, microfilm, and digital records all have distinct requirements for proper care and handling – records managers tend to focus on format to try to solve the challenges of new records mediums. Not only does this focus fail to resolve RIM challenges, it also leads to a perception that RIM's sphere of expertise is limited to managing paper records.

Approaching EDRMS implementations from an IA, taxonomy, and meta data point of view, rather than a format point of view, allows RIM professionals to make serious strides in resolving IM challenges while demonstrating to others in the organization the extent of our expertise, and ability to take advantage of electronic tools.

"Where Did I Put That File?"

A Quick Refresher on The Major Difference Between Paper and Electronic:

— With a paper record or system, records have to be physically located somewhere, and can only be put in one spot. There is a physical constraint. Therefore, our paper management systems evolved to work well under those constraints.

— With electronic records or systems, records can be "put" in as many spots as needed. Even if the record is physical, an electronic system can manage a single entry for that record and display it in any number of "locations" or search results to aid discovery and access to the information. This is an extremely powerful advantage to using an electronic system.

It also requires careful planning in order to take advantage while ensuring proper document control (such as ensuring any required links are maintained for hybrid records).

This is where the combination of IA, metadata and taxonomy become key to records management success.

The Case for IA, Meta Data and Taxonomy

IA, meta data, and taxonomy have always played a role in records and information management. Taxonomy (think of file plans and shared drive folder structures) has often been the most heavily used tool, because of the constraints of paper-based systems (regardless of the format of the record). Taxonomies work well in a physical system. With the move to EDRMS, it is important to take

advantage of all three tools – and to leverage IA and meta data much more than in the past. The combination of IA, meta data, and taxonomy will improve your RM exponentially over a system that prioritizes one over the others. Again, this is where RIM can be invaluable to IT in a successful EDRMS implementation.

What Are We Talking About?

Let's take a detailed look at the different concepts under considerations here:

Architecture - Like Blueprints?

— There are many definitions of information architecture, due in large part to the fact that it is a concept discussed in many fields. Depending on the school of thought, IA may refer to the organizing of information in a logical manner, or it could have a larger scope which takes into account such factors as user experience. For the purposes of this discussion, IA "focuses on organizing, structuring, and labeling content in an effective and sustainable way. The goal is to help users find information and complete tasks" (usability.gov).

— A blueprint is a great way to imagine information **architecture – only instead of a blueprint for a house, it is for a website, a shared drive, a paper filing system, an EDRMS, or whatever other kind of repository you choose. Just as the blueprint of a house will ensure you don't end up with two kitchens, no bathroom, and a foundation that won't support your building, a well-developed IA is essential to building a strong and coherent information system that will grow with your organization.**

That's So Meta

— Meta data literally means "data about data" – it is the descriptive information assigned to specified information sources and later used to locate and retrieve that information.

— If IA is the blueprint for a house, then meta data could be thought of as your plumbing, and the information in the system is the water in the pipes. A proper architecture ensures that:
    — you have the right kinds of pipes (copper or PVC?)
    — the pipes will be appropriate for the building
      (industrial vs domestic)

- the pipes are installed when they need to be (the drain pipe needs to go in before the floor, not after!)
- that all the pipes fit together (what is the right size for a bathtub hookup versus the sewer, and how do they connect?)
- and that the water can get where it needs to go (you've got a tap in the powder room, right?)

— With the right kinds of pipes in the right place, you'll have showers just as hot as you like for decades – and other residents in the house can have lukewarm baths if that's their preference. Due to your excellent blueprint, you've got the right kind of pipes for a house in your climate, and the plumbing needs of all residents are met. That is what metadata can do for you! Robust metadata will help the information in your system flow to all the users in the system – whether they're looking for a hot shower in the bathroom, or to put a load of cold laundry in the wash. Good plumbing gets the right water to the right place at the right time – and good metadata is essential to getting the right information to the right person at the right time.

Taxonowhat?

— Taxonomies are hierarchical (from largest to smallest) ways of grouping ideas, topics, or objects.

In the animal kingdom, we could think of:

MAMMALS
Cats
Tigers
Bengal Tigers

— In records management, taxonomies refer to our classification schemes – usually an organization's file plans. This could take a number of different approaches, including function-based classification, or the "Big Bucket" approach.

In RM, a taxonomy might be:

HUMAN RESOURCES
Hiring
Competitions
2014 - Manager of Sales

— Taxonomy development can be quite complicated, but a strong taxonomy is an essential part of a records management program, and worth the investment. An essential element of your taxonomy is the organization's classification scheme. Depending on the organization, a more complex taxonomy (with relationship modelling) may be desirable.

— Like the general contractor, a taxonomy shows us the relationship and order between all of our activities. Just as the foundation has an impact on the whole of the structure, and electrical needs to be installed before drywall, a taxonomy provides a breakdown of what is happening in the organization.

— Another way to think of it is that taxonomy shows us whether there are subdivisions within "paint." And it is important to be able to tell whether the entire house is to be painted Builder Beige, or if there are other colors too – and where those colors go.

Taxonomies – Are They Still Necessary?

There is some debate in the RIM world about whether taxonomies (classification plans) are still required, given the powers of modern EDRMS implementations. The thrust of the argument against taxonomies is that meta data and IA are so much more powerful for searching than taxonomies (true) and that users should never have to use a taxonomy, so we should dispose of them. This point of view misses several important points:

— While users may prefer to search using metadata and IA rather than browse using a taxonomy, RIM professionals still need taxonomies for efficient and effective management of records throughout their lifecycle, as RM processes rely on taxonomies

— A records inventory (essential for thorough RIM) is a taxonomy. A "big bucket approach" is a taxonomy. In an EDRMS, metadata and IA can now be used to make the EDRMS put records in the right "bucket" (no matter how big or small), but the underlying understanding of the information and determination of how to treat it is still a taxonomy. This improves the user experience by reducing administrative burden, and hiding the classification layer, which many do not understand. This also improves RIM due to higher compliance (an electronic

system will follow rules 100% of the time, which humans do not) and increased accuracy (assuming proper rules in the EDRMS), simplifying disposition at the end of the records lifecycle

— Taxonomies can provide a rationalizing layer to the meta data in an EDRMS – for example, simplifying the search for your own HR records versus a search for all HR records

— Taxonomies provide a common language for the information in an organization. This was one of the first purposes that taxonomies served, and the need still exists. For example, a controlled vocabulary (derived from and linked to your taxonomy) will determine that the term in an EDRMS used for vehicles is "cars" – so a user doesn't have to search for "car," "cars," "auto," "autos," and "truck" to be confident that they have found all of the relevant information they need. Some may think that this simply requires metadata management, but this is truly a problem solved by a robust taxonomy.

— Taxonomies are required for automated records classification projects.

All in all, it seems pretty clear that while meta data and IA have a lot to offer, taxonomies are still an essential part of a complete RIM program.

Creating Positive Outcomes for EDRMS Implementations

Combining IA, meta data and taxonomy to manage records and information will produce some astonishing results for EDRMS implementations (and thus your IT department). Areas of improvement can include:

— Users – whether staff, management, records clerks or others – can find information more easily because it is more flexibly organized. Different users of electronic systems can display all of the information in the system based on their needs. Users are no longer limited to searching or browsing on one aspect of the information. Rather than having to choose between date, subject, author, format, etc., those aspects can be combined by users to produce unique data sets – improving information accessibility by providing access beyond keyword searches and browsing through folders.

— Improving the user experience – users are happier about using the system, because it responds to their needs, rather than feeling frustrated and constrained.

— Improved find-ability – users can now more easily discover relevant information, in addition to finding the information they know exists. IA and meta data can allow users to locate information across systems if you've linked them, and to co-locate information based on unique search parameters, revealing information whose existence was previously unknown to the user. Suddenly, the user has a view into the information across the entire organization – if she wants.

— Increased confidence in searching for and locating records supports and improves response to legal requests, eDiscovery, compliance requirements, and other areas that are traditionally challenging. Robust IA, meta data and taxonomy, especially when applied automatically by the system, dramatically increase an organization's ability to produce all records required for a specific request – whether those records can be found across the enterprise within a specific department.

— Records management programs gain efficiencies and improved ability to complete document disposition. System-applied meta data can be leveraged to ensure that electronic records are tagged with disposition rules from their creation. Suddenly, all the records office needs is for users to save the information with the right meta data and in the right place (which should be straightforward with the right IA). Now, retention rules can be applied in the background by the system, rather than requiring human intervention. System-applied meta data has a high compliance rate, so records staff can be confident in the disposition reports generated by the system – and the organization will be in a position to dispose of electronic records!

This is still a challenge for many organizations, who still are not able to push the delete button – often because they do not have reliable meta data to support the disposition of electronic records.

EDRMS work can be geared to improve any or all of these areas, depending on time frame, scope, budget, and organizational support. A strong work plan, informed by business analysis, should highlight the areas where the organization will see the most benefit. It will also assist with scoping the work, managing expectations, and gaining senior management support. A clear understanding of the business need and articulation of how IA, meta data, and taxonomy work will help demonstrate your value and IT will appreciate this contribution to the implementation project.

Putting It All Together

Whether you are implementing a new system or improving the current one, moving to a system that uses IA, metadata, and taxonomy can be a daunting task. A situational analysis is a good place to start; it will help you determine where your strengths and gaps are. It will also assist IT in project planning – providing information on required timelines, level of effort, and other elements necessary for a successful implementation.

Here's what you need to consider:

— The system(s)
   — Does your organization have an EDRMS?
   — What is the system for managing paper records?
   — Are they the same? If not, are there plans for merging them in future?

— Existing IA/metadata/taxonomy
   — Does the organization have an IA – an overarching plan for how information is managed within the organization? This may be limited to one system, or it may reach across many systems for a true enterprise view. If not, is one in the works? Either way, who is responsible for it?

— When work is being done on your IA, remember that IA can take different user groups into account. So you can design a more user-generated, "friendly" structure that the staff will interface with (like a folder structure) and in the background (using an RM function) tag the same folders with other structures that make sense for RM (the file plan, retention rules, etc). This way, RM staff can view the information through the lens they need to do their work, without forcing everyone else to do so – and vice versa.

— What meta data is in use by your organization? Is it sufficient for varied business needs throughout? For example:
   — RM requirements, either those set by your organization or external governing bodies
   — Enterprise requirements. Things that your organization as a whole will use, outside of RM requirements – such as an organizational naming convention. This could also be a free-text keyword field, fiscal year, or a unique identifier - for example, an insurance company might want a policy number applied to all documents.
   — Departmental requirements. These are meta data elements that specific business groups within the organization will use, but which do not apply across the enterprise. A field to track project numbers, GIS information, and HR coding are all examples. To avoid confusion, use the context provided by your IA to only display it on documents in certain parts of your taxonomy. (This way, only those looking at HR files will see the HR coding rather than having an empty field show up on all documents.)

— What is the state of your taxonomy? Your classification scheme or file plan may be up to date and valid, in which case it should be leveraged.
   — Does your current taxonomy allow for future growth in the organization? Is it sustainable, or is it structured so that it can only reflect the state of affairs for when it was built?
   — If required, the work to create, update or expand the taxonomy is an excellent starting point for moving to a more robust system. While this is being done, ensure to consider, at least at a high level, links to metadata and IA – the three tools influence one another.

— Who are your user groups, and what challenges do they have with accessing and using information? What new or unmet needs do they have?
   — The legal group may have concerns about discovery/eDiscovery, document access, and whether your records have the integrity, authenticity, and reliability to be used as evidence in a court of law. If so, they can be excellent allies in securing organizational support for work on your IA, metadata and taxonomy. Reduction of risk in case of legal action is a concrete benefit to the organization, which can be easily understood by senior management.

- Does your current system allow for the disposition of records, regardless of format? What would be required from your IA, meta data, and taxonomy in order to do so?

- What other problems or challenges has your organization been attempting to address? How can this work alleviate or resolve those problems?

A New Role In A New Environment

Clearly, the right combination of IA, metadata, and taxonomies will bring your RM system – regardless of its format – to the next level of performance. All user groups, from senior management, to staff, to records management personnel, will see an improvement in their ability to access and use the information required to do their jobs. Organizations will also be able to incorporate a larger spectrum of digital communications such as social media and text messaging – ensuring the admissibility of electronic records as evidence in court.

A close, mutually beneficial partnership with IT and business in the organization increases the profile, impact, and voice of a RIM program – all key to remaining relevant in a business world where having a seat at the table is often the number one challenge for RIM.

This is the kind of impact that RIM professionals can have on an EDRMS implementation: designing a system that is truly responsive and will meet organizational needs now and in future. IT may be able to install and run a system, but working together, RIM and IT can implement a system that shines.

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