

# Eight Ways That Meta Data Supercharges Your RIM Software



Meta data plays an integral role in the success of software systems, and this is especially true with records and information-management (RIM) software.

Without certain kinds of meta data, the RIM system is like a library without indexing—a great place for storing things, but ultimately useless because people cannot locate what they are looking for.

However, meta data helps with many more functions than just document search and retrieval. It plays a crucial role in the setup of the system, and ultimately the benefit that the system delivers for the organization.

Every business professional who is involved with the implementation of RIM systems should have a clear grasp of meta data and its potential uses. In this paper we will discuss why meta data is so important and share some of the many ways that meta data adds value when incorporated into your RIM system.

**As we will show, the possibilities for metadata are limitless!**

# What Is Meta Data?

Meta data is often described as data that provides information about other data<sup>1</sup>, or more simply: information about information.



In a RIM system, the presence of meta data means that the system is not only tracking individual business documents (paper and electronic), it is also capturing and storing information about those documents.

To help you visualize meta data, you could think of it like sticky notes or tags applied to a traditional paper file folder.

In a RIM system, the virtual equivalents of the sticky notes are the meta data fields attached to each document.

To help you find documents, the RIM system simply scans through the meta data fields to find a match. In many cases, this is faster and produces a better match than scanning the full contents of the files themselves. Once you have retrieved the document you need, you can learn more about it by reviewing the rest of the meta data fields.

One thing to note about meta data is that not all of it is visible to the users of the system. Some of it sits in the background to be used by the system when carrying out certain functions like retention management.

## Getting Meta Data Right from the Start

Meta data is used in every single information system we work with on a daily basis, including electronic content management (ECM), customer relationship management (CRM) and enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems.

In RIM software systems, meta data plays the same important roles that it does in other systems, as well as some roles that are unique to records and information management.

In order for meta data to play all these key roles, it needs to be carefully planned in advance—long before the system is put in place.



To get meta data right you need to explore a number of important questions, such as:

- Who will use the system?
- What tasks will the system help them carry out? What tasks will the system handle?
- How will data enter the system?
- What other systems does the system need to integrate with?
- What information needs to be pulled out of the system?
- What kind of tracking is required in terms of how the system is used, how the information moves and how it changes over time?

Depending on the type of project, you could expect to spend anywhere from months to over a year designing a meta data structure that will deliver the value you need.

This is an important point to keep in mind as you plan the implementation of a RIM software system. We have heard of many cases where the meta data design phase was rushed and the results were disappointing.

# Eight Ways Meta Data Is Used in RIM Systems

To inspire your RIM software implementation and help you understand how meta data is involved, we will share some of the most common ways that meta data adds value in RIM systems.



## 1. Document Search

Most information systems offer users multiple ways to find the information they are looking for. Full-text search is one option. With full-text search, users enter keywords into the search bar and the system returns a list of documents that contain those keywords in the body of the document. This approach works well for many kinds of searches.

Meta data offers another powerful option. When meta data is incorporated into a search, the system will return results based on a match in one or more meta data fields. The possibilities for this kind of search are endless. For example, a user might want to retrieve all documents associated with a particular client file number which is stored in a meta data field. Or, a user in law enforcement could search the meta data field for the case number, or in the energy industry, the well file number.



## 2. Document Classification

Document classification is one of the foundational pieces of a records management program. When you know what type of document you are dealing with then you may know many other things about it, such as who can access it and how long to retain it.

In most RIM systems, the document type or “classification code” is a core piece of metadata used by the software itself and by users.



## 3. Permission Management

Meta data also plays a key role in the area of permission management, dictating which documents can be accessed by which users. Most software systems are set up with different user roles, for example:

**administrator**  
**manager**  
**staff**  
**sales representative**  
**author**  
**editor**

In a RIM system, roles like these can be used to grant access to certain kinds of documents as dictated by the corporate classification scheme. For each document entry, a meta data field indicates the type of document involved.

For more granular permission management, you can create other meta data fields in addition to the basic document type or classification field. For example, you could create a meta data field to flag certain accounting documents as highly sensitive and grant permissions only to certain user types.



## 4. Audit Trails

By recording the history of meta data values, the system can create a very powerful audit trail.

For example, physical records will often have a meta data field to track which staff member is currently in possession of a document. As the physical file changes hands, the system updates the meta data field with the name or employee number of the new holder of the file. As the RIM system does this, it generates a running log of who has had the file.

Because all of these log entries are stamped with the date and time, the changing meta data fields create a powerful audit trail, or “chain of custody,” for each document. You will know exactly who had each document, when they had it and for how long. This kind of information is invaluable if the organization is audited or involved in legal proceedings, or if an important file goes missing.



## 5. Retention and Disposition

By tagging each document with a classification code and creation date, the system is able to easily determine when most documents are ready for disposition. For example, when a new financial statement is loaded into the system it will be assigned a classification code in a meta data field. The RIM system is programmed to know that those kinds of accounting documents need to be retained for seven years. The system can then begin the countdown to the disposition date for that particular document. In seven years’ time, the system will include that document in a disposition report, indicating that it can be shredded or otherwise disposed of.

Another area where metadata helps with retention and disposition is the case of event-based retention. The retention periods for some files, such as mortgage files or HR records, do not actually start until some event takes place, such as the final mortgage payment or the

retiring of the employee. For these types of documents, the system can use another yes/no meta data field to indicate whether the required event has taken place. Based on the document type, the RIM system will know that the retention countdown should not start until the triggering event has occurred and the appropriate meta data field has been updated to “yes.”

One final retention example involves legal holds. If a document is involved in ongoing legal proceedings, the organization needs to ensure that it does not accidentally get shredded or disposed of while the proceedings are active. To avoid this risk, a simple meta data field can be used to indicate that the document has had a legal hold placed on it. As long as the system sees the legal hold, the document will not be included in any disposition reports.



## 6. Operational Insights

When meta data is implemented with the needs of management in mind, it can be used to generate powerful insights about your operations.

For example, one client used meta data to capture the office location where each document originated. After analyzing the logs, the client realized that one branch office was generating the lion's share of a particular document type. By surfacing this potential issue, meta data allowed the organization to reallocate resources and make other changes to improve operational efficiency.

Time stamps offer another powerful way to use meta data for analytical purposes. As documents move between various individuals or departments, the time stamps can be used to analyze the efficiency of the workflows involved.



## 7. Version Tracking

One of the roles of an electronic content-management system is to facilitate the creation of documents. While RIM systems are not purpose-built for document collaboration and versifying, they can still be very helpful as a way to track different versions of documents.

In order to do this, some of our clients assign a meta data field for the document version number. That way, staff can quickly determine which version of the document they are looking at.

This can be very helpful in cases where organizations are required to retain older versions of documents but don't want to risk a staff member mixing them up with the current version.



## 8. Compliance and Risk Management

Another great use for meta data is to track the completeness of a file. For many industries this is an invaluable tool to ensure compliance and avoid risk.

For example, to stay compliant in the mortgage banking industry, a number of specific documents are required to be retained within the mortgage file. A simple yes/no meta data field can be used to indicate whether all of the required documentation has been entered into the RIM system.

With this meta data field in place, managers can then prepare simple reports to show which mortgage files are not yet complete. Staff can follow up on those files to obtain the missing documentation. This helps keep the organization compliant with applicable statutes and industry guidelines.

## Consistency and Automation Are Key

For meta data to work well in a RIM system, it is essential to apply it consistently across documents. If someone is looking for all the files related to a particular product, the meta data field for product number needs to be accurately applied to all related documents. Otherwise the employee can't be sure they will have everything they need from the search results.

In many cases, it is necessary to automate the population of meta data fields in order to achieve the required consistency. The experience of many organizations has shown that when meta data needs to be entered manually, poor results often follow. Workers will not always enter the required meta data, and when they do, they may use an inconsistent naming convention, or make a typo or other error.

## What's Next?

It takes time to design and implement meta data and to apply it consistently, but the effort is worth it. Meta data can add incredible value to your organization, making it easier to access and manage information and giving you powerful insights into how it is created, how it is used and how it supports your business processes.

If you are planning the implementation of a RIM system, an ECM or another enterprise-software solution, it helps to learn from the experience of information-management professionals. The experts at TAB can help you design and implement meta data in a number of different enterprise-software systems, including TAB FusionRMS, our records and information-management software solution.

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