

5 Tips for Selecting and Implementing RIM Software in the Hybrid Environment



The New Hybrid Reality

The increasing dominance of computers in everyday business means that a larger percentage of an organization's records consist of word-processing documents, spreadsheets, image files, and other electronic formats. At the same time, the increased ease of printing and copying has helped paper file collections grow rather than shrink. With both the physical and electronic world growing few organizations' records exist solely in one world or the other. There are even many individual 'hybrid files' containing both paper and electronic records.

So how do we apply records management controls to this increasingly hybrid environment? Many software suppliers offer tools to do just that, but the relative success of any electronic records management solution depends on the sound application of records management principles and methodologies. This includes using specialized tactics to address the unique needs of paper records, electronic records, and the often challenging interplay between the two.

In this article you will find five tips to help you in selecting and implementing an electronic solution for the hybrid records management environment. While these tips and the specific tools described within them are specially designed as a response to the new reality, they are based solidly on traditional records management concepts.

Tip 1: Establish RIM requirements up front

One of the biggest challenges in managing the hybrid file is addressing media-specific needs without losing sight of general legal and business requirements. Such requirements apply regardless of media format, and the laws that mandate them make little allowance for the specific challenges introduced by an organization's media choices. Examples of these requirements include:

- Requirements to retain records for a minimum number of years.
- Requirements to safeguard information against unauthorized access, alteration or deletion in order to mitigate the risk of non-compliance with privacy legislation, Sarbanes-Oxley or contractual obligations.
- Requirements to retrieve records in response to litigation, audits, incident response and other time sensitive scenarios.

In meeting these and other requirements, it is critical that an organization be able to provide evidence of reliable standards and due diligence processes. Such evidence takes the form of established records management governance tools, which may include:

- An information management policy, records retention policy or other corporate-level policy directive stating requirements for the management of recorded information. Such a policy should also include executive endorsement of records management program activities and outline responsibilities at the departmental and individual level.
- Detailed procedures, guidelines and other documentation defining standardized workflows for such tasks as file creation, classification, retrieval, location tracking, and disposal.
- A functional records classification, which divides records into categories based on the different business activities for which they provide evidentiary and informational support.
- A records retention schedule which assigns standard time periods for keeping record categories based on documented statutory, regulatory and operational requirements.
- Information security protocols which assign sensitivity risk levels and identify appropriate security safeguards for mitigating that risk.

Developing these standards is a critical first step in records management program development, not to mention an indispensable precursor to the selection, procurement and implementation of an electronic solution.



Tip 2: Build RIM requirements into the electronic system

The documented standards described in the previous tip may be used to defend the integrity of records and the reliability of information management controls in the event of a legal challenge or other high-risk scenario. But such a defense also depends on the ability of an organization to demonstrate that standards actually have been implemented. In the hybrid environment, records management governance requirements must be applied to both paper and electronic records.

In selecting electronic records management software, look for tools that can be configured and customized based directly on your organization's records management governance tools. Just as a manual environment requires that workers follow standards to the letter, so too should those standards be built into actual software functionality and user interfaces. Look for software solutions that facilitate compliance with standards via the following features:

- Categorization of records based on corporate-level file classification schemes.
- Application of records retention schedules to both electronic content stored on the system and paper files tracked via the system.
- Additional indexing of individual files and records based on more detailed meta data standards and taxonomies.
- Assignment of responsibilities and system access levels based on roles defined in corporate policy.
- Automated processing of records based on tasks and workflows defined in records management procedures.

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Tip 3: Offer one stop information shopping

A comprehensive records management program adds value to business by managing both electronic records and physical holdings such as paper files. In selecting software solutions to support this program, your final goal should be a single user interface that searches and retrieves both paper and electronic records using a variety of relevant indexing fields. Possible indexing fields should include:

- Basic content descriptors, such as file numbers, file titles, subject keywords, company names, personal names, and relevant business functions/activities.
- Origin descriptors, such as individual creator, departmental 'owner', and the date on which the record was created or last updated.
- Records retention and disposition indicators, such as file creation date, file closure date, record class code, schedule number, and legal hold status (to be used as needed).
- Any specialized data descriptors unique to the particular industry or business activities which records support. Possible examples of these descriptors may include a well identification number (for the petroleum industry), policy number (for the insurance industry), or legal counter party (for law firms).
- Hyperlinks to relevant electronic folders and documents stored either on the system or a repository with links to the system.
- Information describing the current location and sign-out status of relevant physical records.

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Different software vendors offer different approaches to meeting this need. Some enterprise content management software includes optional modules for physical file management. However, never assume that a product which effectively manages electronic documents will necessarily meet records management requirements applicable to all formats.



If your organization's current content management software does not meet all your needs, there is still hope. With the right configuration work, many document management solutions can be successfully integrated with more specialized software products which are specifically designed with the management of physical records in mind. End users generally don't care whether an overall retrieval system consists of a standalone product or an integration of different software. What does matter is the sum of those parts, which should offer "one stop shopping" functionality for searching and retrieving both paper and electronic records via a single interface. Given the hybrid nature of many files, anything less would give only half the picture, introducing any number of legal and operational risks, not to mention wasting valuable work time.

Tip 4: Respond to the unique needs of paper records

For all the talk of a paperless office, many organizations have a very real business need for paper records. Some areas of businesses depend on physical authentication features such as signatures, stamps and seals. While the law does make some allowance for converting official records to an electronic format (e.g. document imaging), it may not always make the most sense financially or otherwise to pursue those options and abandon original paper records. In short, paper is here to stay, at least for the time being.

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It is important, then, that the unique storage and distribution needs of paper records not get overlooked amidst the justifiable excitement around electronic records retrieval. These needs go well beyond retrieval and indexing concerns. To address these needs, many integrated software solutions offer modules to support day-to-day physical file management processes. Examples of those modules include:

- Bar code technology, radio frequency technology and other tools that automate the sign-out and location tracking of physical records media;
- Electronic ordering of inactive physical records stored offsite; and
- Design and printing of physical file labels, incorporating such established file management strategies as numerical indexing, bar coding, and color coding.

Where a particular software product does not include these capabilities, it may still allow for customization so that it can interface directly with specialized physical file management software products. These products are especially helpful where an organization has already implemented electronic content management software, turning an otherwise partial solution into a comprehensive toolkit for managing the hybrid file across its entire life cycle.

Tip 5: Develop electronic support for real world records retention

Identifying and applying records retention requirements can be an involved process, and many organizations are looking to electronic records management solutions to automate that process as much as possible. Software vendors have heard the call. Most of today's systems have the capability of automatically flagging a record for disposal when it reaches a certain age.

This works fine for records whose retention periods really do lapse a fixed number of years after files are created. In some organizations, the majority of records retention periods may even work that way. But effective solution developers know that this is only part of the records retention picture. Retention periods for many paper and electronic files are event-based, meaning that the retention period does not even begin until a predefined event triggers closure of the file. Common examples of retention events include:

- Termination of an employment relationship (for a personnel file)
- Termination or expiry of an agreement (for a contract file)
- Completion of an annual internal audit (for annual accounting files)
- Project closure (for project files)
- Decommissioning of a plant or facility (for some Engineering files)
- Corporate dissolution (for articles of incorporation and other core governance documents)

For some files, the retention event may not occur for any number of years. Calculating disposal dates based on when files were created runs the risk of destroying records before their retention period has begun, much less ended. In the best case scenario, your organization's staff is forced to review lists of possible destructions that have to be delayed. In the worst case scenario, electronic records are automatically deleted and paper files sent to shredding facilities too soon, contravening internal policy and breaking the law.

As a direct alternative to both nightmare scenarios, make sure that event-based retention is built into the design and configuration of your RM software. In its simplest form, this includes:

- Naming of specific retention events in the actual retention rules applied by the system;
- Data entry points for users to inform the system when the event has actually occurred;
- Calculation of the retention period based on when the event actually occurs;
- Sending of notifications to record "owners" when the event-based retention period has indeed lapsed; and—
Opportunity for the user to further postpone disposal where there is a legal hold or other valid business case to retain the record further.

Bring RM to the Table

Just as the best vendors engage the services of records management experts in their product development activities, so too should your organization ensure records management representation on vendor selection and system implementation teams that impact RM compliance. The consequences of not doing so can be significant. Even where a suite of software products offers the capabilities outlined above, requirements such as event-based retention can be easily missed during system configuration and implementation.

By engaging your own internal or external records management resources, your organization can help ensure that software systems are configured to reflect the records management policies, procedures and roles specific to your organization, as well as the more specific needs and risks attached to different categories of records.

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