Document Management 2.0:

Revisiting the Fundamentals

By Sylvia Feldman, Optical Image Technology

I realize that all of this sounds intimidating. And the reality is that fear of change is keeping many organizations from transitioning from paper to an EDMS.

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S orry seems to be the hardest word.

But the fact is that I owe many of you an apology. You see, for the past several years, I've been writing articles advising you to digitize your documents. I've been telling you that making all of your information available electronically is a fundamental step towards process improvement. This holds true, by the way, no matter what line of work you're in. That's not why I'm apologizing.

Here's the deal: I keep telling you that you need to digitize your information. I've told you why, but I haven't told you how. So with this article, I'd like to take a step back so that we can all take a giant leap forward. Because whether you're talking about Document Management 101 or Document Management 2.0, digitizing your information is an essential component of process enhancement.

There's one thing that you need to do before you get started. Think about the business processes that drive your organization. Now, think about who in your organization understands those business processes. Maybe your managers are able to see the relationships between your documents and your throughput. Maybe your end users who are entrenched in your processes have some ideas as to how to make things run more efficiently. You're going to want to seek input from people who handle your documents. You may even have to form a committee. It's a necessary evil that can lead to a greater good. The bottom line is that you need to get a handle on your business processes—those that work well and those that don't.

Take inventory

Once you have a handle on your business processes, you'll want to take stock of the documents that drive your business processes. Pay attention to the following:

- In what formats are your archived/incoming/outgoing documents?
- What departments/individuals need access to which documents?
- What processes are associated with each document?
- How can the data associated with the document be reused for other processes?

Let's use a job application as an example. You might receive a job application as a paper form. Or, more commonly, you might receive an application as an online submission or an electronic form. It would need to be accessed by a department manager or other decision-maker. If a candidate is offered and accepts a position, HR may need to access the application. Onboarding processes such as payroll, insurance, and 401(K) enrollment might also be associated with a job application. More specifically, these processes could use demographic data from the job application so that a candidate doesn't have to continually supply the same information over and over again as s/he completes paperwork.

Obviously, a document as prevalent as a job application is associated with a number of other documents and processes. A document management system can help you ensure that all of your associated documentation is in electronic form and is accessible with the click of a mouse.

A word about indexing

I won't lie to you. Indexing your documents may not be as fun as it sounds. Remember that committee that you put together when you first started thinking about implementing an electronic document

management system (EDMS)? Now is a good time to consult it. You need to determine what criteria your different departments use to search for documents, and come up with index values to support their needs. It sounds simple. But complexities arise when you realize that different departments and individuals may access any given document in different ways. Indexing is usually the most difficult—and the most worthwhile—part of a conversion from paper processes to electronic. Don't make the mistake of simply scanning all of your documents into a system without indexing. Sure, it's simple enough. And it involves eliminating paper. But in the grand scheme of things, without indexing you are duplicating all of the inefficiencies that are associated with paper processes.

Consider your archived/stored paper documents

As you are taking inventory of the active documents that drive your business processes, you will also want to take into consideration your archived paper documents. Is it cost-effective to put them into electronic form? Only you can answer that. Some factors to consider:

- **If you need to find a specific archived document, are you able to in a reasonable amount of time?** This might not be important if you are merely trying to find an eight-year-old invoice about which a customer has a question. Then again, if an auditor or a lawyer needs to see that invoice, it might behoove you to make it easily accessible.

- **Would the costs of converting your paper to electronic format outweigh your physical storage costs?** Some organizations keep their archived paper documents in offsite storage areas, which can be costly to maintain. Others keep them on-site, which may lead to crowded conditions and process inefficiencies. Do you have the manpower to convert your old documents to electronic format? If not, do you have the resources to outsource the process? If cost and space are not an issue for your organization, is it really in your best interest to convert your old paper records?

- **Are your paper documents safe from fires, floods, or other potential disasters?** An organization with facilities located within Florida's hurricane belt or in an area prone to earthquakes may have different needs than an organization that doesn't face these threats regularly. Nonetheless, no organization is immune to threats.

Optimize incoming documents for efficiency

You don't always have control over the format of your incoming documents. But once they enter your organization, you can improve operational efficiency by putting everything into electronic format. Consider:

- **Incoming paper.** Scan incoming paper immediately as it enters your organization. Index each document in a way that will be meaningful to the users/departments that will need access to those documents. Indexing can be performed manually. You can also take advantage of character recognition (such as OCR or ICR) technologies that enable automatic indexing as documents are scanned. As you consider document management vendors, look for one that doesn't charge per scanning station and volume.

- **Word documents and PDFs.** Your document management system should have the capability to integrate with all of your line-of-business software. This means that—thanks to behind-the-scenes configuration—Word documents and PDFs can be added to the repository with the click of a mouse.

- **Paper forms.** Your document management system can enable you to replace your paper forms with electronic (eForms). eForms allow your organization to input, store, and access forms securely from any location, and to launch appropriate business processes.

- **Fax messages.** Your document management system should be able to integrate with your electronic fax server, eliminating paper from the fax process.

- **Computer-generated reports.** Text and complex print streams can be captured by your document management system for easy storage and retrieval of COLD and other computer-generated reports.

- **Email messages.** A robust system allows you monitor email accounts and import emails along with their attachments.

Consider the repercussions of your outgoing communications

Obviously, you have much more control of your outgoing documents than your incoming documents. And obviously, you should communicate electronically whenever it is possible. Unfortunately, there may be times when you have to revert to paper communications. Typically, this will happen when you are unable to reach customers or other shareholders electronically. If your only option is to send correspondence via old school mail, think about how you can optimize efficiency when that correspondence is returned. Placing a barcode on outgoing mail with demographic and other information can ease indexing when that letter is returned. If any outgoing correspondence is intended to elicit customer response, barcoding allows you to simplify your tasks when that correspondence is returned.

Look at the big picture

I realize that all of this sounds intimidating. And the reality is that fear of change is keeping many organizations from transitioning from paper to an EDMS. Nonetheless, here's something to think about. If you're from my generation, you probably remember what it was like to transition from a typewriter to a PC. You may recall that there was a learning curve. But now that you've mastered the intricacies of the PC, it's hard to fathom how you could get anything done efficiently without one. An EDMS provides a similar acceleration with respect to efficiency. Those who transition from paper to an EDMS realize quickly that it is an indispensible component of business process management.