

Going digital – how hard can it be?

By Glen Morgan

The move to digital document and records management challenges behaviour, whether you work in the public or private sector. The move can rapidly build momentum when for instance, a manager has been to a conference and is swayed by being told “going digital will solve all your problems, you’ll be able to find everything at the touch of a button”. Or the IT unit is fed up with thousands of emails cluttering the system with multiple copies of documents in personal folders.

Based on my experience in this field, spanning some ten years, ‘Moving to Digital’ will only give good results if your foundation is solid. So why do so many organisations come unstuck and end up with very disillusioned staff and digital landfill? Well to put it quite simply, if you are having problems managing hard copy documents and records then going digital is only going to exacerbate the problems not solve them.

So here’s a work plan that I’ve tested out several times. It works, regardless of organisational size and whether in the public or private sector. The steps are not sequential but rather pieces of a jigsaw that fit together to build the foundation to moving digitally.

Step 1: Analyse your organisation. Use the NSW Government Chief Information Office’s information asset management maturity assessment tool to find out what exists and what you need to do. If you fall into the basic level don’t give up: you’re not alone.

Step 2: Get the basic tools in place. By this I mean a strategic plan, policies, procedures, business classification scheme, thesaurus and disposal authority (see www.records.nsw.gov.au/recordkeeping/). Don’t aim for perfection: develop a skeleton toolset and refine over time. I often use the training programme (see Step 5) to identify further risks, retention periods and subject descriptors and then adjust the skeleton. As the organisation matures, so will the quality of your tools.

Step 3: Identify your current on-site and off-site storage costs and develop a destruction plan. Storage costs are usually hidden amongst accommodation, stationery etc and can be a big surprise when separated out. In your analysis: identify what could be destroyed now and within next five years and then show immediate and potential savings over that period - then action your plan. Also do a stocktake of where documents and records are stored internally. Identify these with bright coloured paper labels so floor storage becomes visible. Sydney floor space is expensive and so is continually buying cupboards to store information. Why is this important? Because even if you’re moving digitally this cost continues unless addressed.

Step 4: Get people engaged. I’ve always found that without trust, people won’t actively participate and share their knowledge of what documents and records exist outside of the corporate system(s). The fear factor is equally important, especially now and as the workforce ages. People fear their knowledge will be captured and they’ll become redundant. I came across this saying a while ago and I use it as a reminder about the importance of people in the equation:

It is one thing to communicate something clearly so that it is correctly understood ... but it is another thing entirely to convince the recipient to ‘buy in’ to the message, and change their behaviour as a result.

One activity that works is running a “Records Week”. Planning is essential and it should always follow training so that one reinforces

the other. Records Week provides an opportunity for everyone to clean up their desk, cupboards, boxes under desks, email accounts, personal drives, shared folders etc. Management and staff all need to be involved, tallies are taken and announced about how much has been legally destroyed, transferred to corporate records or prepared ready to be moved to offsite storage if retention is longer than say, two years, or how many bytes have been freed up.

For one small organisation it amounted to 1.3km of unsorted documents and records being legally destroyed in that week with the process underway. A competition was held to find the weirdest document and the oldest. A digital version followed, resulting in reduced emails and duplicated reports, submissions and other documents.

Step 5: Use training as a platform for change. This works well if you link training to business risks and benefits first. I usually get discussions going around risks of not finding documents and the cost of keeping documents that are no longer needed. Then introduce the concept of records, why not all documents are records and then the governance framework. I’ve found this business driven approach works better than talking about governance first and business second.

Step 6: Transitioning. Interim arrangements get people started down the digital path. Developing shared folder structures reflecting functions, activities and subject descriptors of your organisation gets people thinking corporately and starts to get rid of the folders titled “John’s work” or “General”.

A similar approach can be used for emails by implementing shared folders and rules about when to c.c. others, storing attachments etc. Managers and staff begin to get used to the idea of shared information, and taking responsibility for its corporate management. These two behavioural shifts are critical for moving digitally and implementing an EDRM system.

Working with your IT colleagues at this step is a positive move as it gives you an entrée into their environment.

So here we are ... at the end of a quick tour of my work plan but at the beginning of a major change in the way your organisation views and manages its documents and records regardless of the form they take. Implementation is not easy nor is it sequential, and a critical factor is the attitude of the CEO and senior management. Any change has its challenges, and even more so when moving digitally: it quickly takes people out of their comfort zone and into an open information environment where accessibility and reuse of information become key drivers - rather than a “this is mine” attitude.



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