

Corporate Compliance Without Burdening the End User: Change Management Lessons from Ergon Energy

By Petá K Sweeney

Since 2002, Queensland's Ergon Energy has been preparing for the introduction of an enterprise-wide RM solution. Change lessons learned over the past 4 years continue to determine how staff of Ergon's Records Management Unit interact with the organisation to raise awareness of best practice recordkeeping and to help build a corporate culture that values records and information as important assets.

With changing legislative and corporate compliance obligations, Ergon Energy, like many government agencies, is moving towards recordkeeping best practice. This article shares some of the lessons learned so far on the change journey.

The journey began in 2002 when Ergon Energy established a Records Management Project to develop strategies to meet compliance obligations under the Public Records (Qld) Act 2002. The Queensland State Archivist's endorsement of its Strategic Recordkeeping Implementation Plan in 2003 enabled the project to build momentum.

In 2004, while developing an Operational Recordkeeping Implementation Plan, it became clear that an evolutionary rather than revolutionary model was required. Readers from Queensland public sector agencies will be familiar with the legislative requirements to have these plans in place. (Others can learn more about the Plan from the box on this page.)

Given the amount of change that was impacting on its business, Ergon Energy wanted to meet the variety of legislative and

The Strategic Recordkeeping Implementation Plan

In compliance with Information Standard 40: Recordkeeping, all public authorities in Queensland are required to submit to Queensland State Archives a Strategic Recordkeeping Implementation Plan for endorsement. The purpose of the Plan is:

1. To document what steps the organisation is planning to undertake to meet the requirements of each principle, and thus how it intends to comply with the standard.
2. To ensure that all public authorities incorporate recordkeeping into the overall strategic planning framework of the organisation as a key activity enabling and supporting the delivery of its functions and services.

compliance obligations for recordkeeping with minimal burden on members of staff.

"Our business is experiencing an incredible amount of change through an enterprise-wide initiative impacting all of our staff," says Chris Simpson, Ergon Energy's Manager of Records Services. "To place further burden on our staff in the form of a major eDRMS implementation and expect success was an unrealistic objective."

Lesson 1: Evolutionary Not Revolutionary Change

They say the only constant in life is change and the environment at Ergon Energy is largely reflective of this. However, constant change makes everyone weary and many successful change practices may appear to be insincere and therefore negatively received by the end user.

The first lesson on our change journey was the realisation that evolutionary

change was better than revolutionary change.

Evolutionary change equates to a gradual adaptation to the environment or a specific requirement – in this case the recordkeeping legislative and corporate compliance obligations – over time.

It was considered that even resilient staff such as those employed at Ergon Energy have a change tolerance level, consequently this led deliberately to discounting a revolutionary 'big bang' approach to recordkeeping improvements.

The response to this approach from members of staff has been encouraging. Staff are more willing to participate in the change journey as well as offering suggestions for improvements. They do so knowing that changes will take place gradually and allow for time to fully bed down new practices and that effective enterprise wide changes require their help.

Taking this evolutionary approach naturally means compliance also comes gradually. Clearly there are benefits of being compliant over night but realistically where does this happen with success in the business world?

Like evolution, where successful species adapt and change gradually over time, continuing and planned activities resulting in compliant practice are more like to remain culturally embedded long after a 'quick and dirty' reactionary fix.

Lesson 2: Consult, Consult, Consult

Avoiding the 'quick and dirty' approach and gaining the end users assistance to implement change is fundamentally important. Consult, consult, consult then became the second lesson learnt on the change journey.

While users can be hesitant at first and time may be required to prove genuine consultation, persistence will see rewards. At Ergon Energy consultation is not to be taken lightly and a real effort was made to get some early consultation runs on the board across the enterprise.

For instance, after the initial round of consultation the resulting statements and goals were made available to any interested party. They were also articulated in reports, web statements and used to guide the recordkeeping activities from that point forward.

This had the result that those whose key business was not recordkeeping but had taken the time to contribute could see themselves, or at least their ideas and thoughts and suggestions, in the outcomes of the consultation.

Consultation after this point became easier because the end user



could see the consultation was genuine and that concerns, difficulties and suggestions would really be considered.

This is not to say all suggestions and concerns could be addressed. It was clearly stated at the beginning of the consultation the parameters of scope and what the intended outcome was to achieve.

However, it was also recognised that consultation sometimes involves a period of 'venting' before the real partnership can develop. Often, participants just want to have their voices heard, and use the consultation process to achieve this - rightly or wrongly.

Once these people are heard the consultation process can begin in earnest and business users can begin to take real ownership through the contribution of ideas and suggestions that shape the future of the enterprise.

In embedding responsibility for compliance across the enterprise the consultation approach has proved effective at Ergon Energy and further consultation will be used throughout the next phases of the project to strengthen that

sense of ownership and responsibility.

The consultation process has meant some additional effort for the Records Services unit however, the sense of recordkeeping conscientiousness and cultural mind-shift that is developing far out weighs the time required for a genuine consultative approach.

Lesson 3: Let Business Benefits Drive the Change

As adults, very few people like being told what to do or how to do it, and the consultation approach assisted us overcoming this problem. It also soon became evident that legislation and compliance are the mainstay of only a small number of people and that most members of staff at Ergon Energy were not going to take kindly to making and keeping records simply because of legislation.

Instead of taking the 'big stick' approach and waving the Public Records (Qld) Act 2002 under their noses, a conscious decision was made to emphasise the business benefits of good recordkeeping and downplay the compliance requirements.

This is not to say that change activities were implemented without thought to complying with industry standards and legislative

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requirements. Far from it. However, the words compliance and legislation are hardly mentioned when compared with phrases such as mitigating business risk, increasing efficiency, developing capacity and adding value.

Taking this approach has led to an enterprise wide culture reflecting the staff's willingness to actually practice good recordkeeping and the Records Services unit is seen as a provider of solutions to the information challenges faced each day.

Using the business benefit approach will allow change management activities to be targeted at particular levels throughout the enterprise and to making the benefits relevant for each user in Ergon Energy.

For instance, with the field staff that connect residential electricity, change activities work around electrical safety and other business benefits that help to make the reasons for recordkeeping relevant to their own experiences.

As to meeting compliance requirements, well it hasn't simply fallen out of changes to the business practices. Regular audits will still be required to ensure compliance is maintained but the reasons for all staff to make and keep records remains largely driven by business benefits rather than legislative imperative.

Chris Simpson explains, "Compliance is a consequence of business best practice recordkeeping; this has always been my interpretation of the Queensland legislation and I'm sure that the same applies in other jurisdictions".

Lesson 4: This is Not a System Implementation

The final lesson learnt revolved around making sure underlying process and practices were in order before laying a system such as an eDRMS over the top.

Following industry best practice Ergon Energy decided to ensure all processes and practices were in order before implementing a new system. This was a particularly important lesson but a difficult one to convince some people on.

System implementers (no disrespect intended here) can have a wonderful way of convincing the 'powers that be' that a system will answer their every prayer. The reality is that a system will only manage the supporting structure underneath. If that support structure is a mess the system will manage that mess – wonderfully, efficiently, without a doubt – but it will still be a mess.

With this in mind, Ergon Energy has set off along a path to ensure the underlying process and practices are close to industry best practice before a system is put in place.

This has had the effect of delaying the implementation of an eDRMS, but Ergon Energy Records Services staff are confident that with a compliant foundation there will be less disruption and change management required when the system is ultimately rolled out across the enterprise.

Because Ergon Energy staff will already be practicing good recordkeeping, the system will become merely another instrument in the recordkeeping toolkit.

Good practices now will also mean the end user has only to learn a system rather than learn good recordkeeping practice at the same time. Change management is therefore less stressful for everyone concerned.

Where to From Here?

Ergon Energy is moving into the next phase of the project and making a concerted effort to raise the profile of recordkeeping across the enterprise. With the foundation being laid for good recordkeeping practice through training and awareness, the time is right to improve the image of recordkeepers and recordkeeping through a coordinated communication and marketing programme.

The aim is to foster the belief that the Records Services unit is a provider of solutions to the information challenges faced each day.

Phase three (just getting under way) will see the first of the system implementations, an upgrade to the existing corporate records management system, rolled out to the main recordkeeping practitioners across the state.

It is anticipated the current foundations will be well set to support the introduction of a new system and success in this phase will have widespread implications for the remaining rollout and the continuance of recordkeeping best practice.

So, can Ergon Energy achieve corporate compliance without burdening the end user? The proof, as they say, is in the pudding. Col Hayward, Contracts Manager with Ergon Energy's Retail Business Unit, says, "My views on the need for effective recordkeeping have changed as a result of the quiet efforts of the Ergon Energy Records Services team to help staff in their daily tasks.

"By providing a seamless interface between the records created on a day to day basis and those that we need as background information, the Team has, apparently, ensured that we are well on the way towards meeting our recordkeeping obligations". 

The Author

Peta Sweeney, BA Lib & Info Science, BEd, MBA Trng & Devel, MRMA is a professional member of the Records Management Association of Australasia and has recently held the position of Chair, Professional Development Committee, for the Queensland State Government Chapter.



Involved in the records and information management industry for the past 20 years in both local and state government, Peta joined Queensland State Archives as a policy officer during the roll out of the Public Records Act 2002 and supporting Information Standard 40: recordkeeping. She was also recently part of the whole of government eDRMS pilot at the Department of Employment and Training. In both instances Peta worked with agencies and business units to ensure information management solutions align with legislative obligations while meeting business needs.

Now an information management consultant at Records Solutions, Peta continues this work with a variety of agencies including Ergon Energy. She is also a strong advocate for using business needs to drive recordkeeping mindful that people need to interact with the recordkeeping systems that serve them.