Document Management – Filling the Chasm Between End-Users and IT Professionals.

During the 1980's we saw the advent of mainstream software systems that housed our electronic information; email, network drives, floppy disks, cd's etc. Consequently, the task of managing most of this information was not the responsibility of record management specialists, it fell into the hands of IT Professional. Database Administrators began to create space for information to be stored.

Through the 1990's we saw drastic reductions in the cost of storing electronic information, however this lead to expediential growth in document creation. With more documents we required more space, but now organisations are beginning to understand that buying more disk space doesn't come without its problems. As we move into the 21st century, the shift of managing this information has began falling back into the hands of those who understand the complexities of making information accessible, accurate and authentic. A change whereby end-users are beginning to manage their information at the desktop with drastic decentralisation of records management control. End-users began to face the all too common problems relating to lost documents, confusion over which version of a document was the most current (draft versus final) and litigation because of poor record keeping practices.

Software vendors and IT software developers focused on creating applications to combat these ever increasing problems. Unfortunately, purchasing software is not the whole solution. Gartner estimated that 80% of EDMS implementations are unsuccessful, and the majority of those implementations fail because of "people reasons". Being able to communicate the business requirements of the end-users to the IT professionals can be an arduous task when neither party understands the importance of records management. To design a system that is robust and effective, there needs to be a middleman. Someone who understands the records management requirements of the organisation and the end user, and who understands how to translate that into technical terms so the IT Professionals can focus on what they know best in terms of software solutions that best meet their clients needs.

With many organisations now going down the path of purchasing software to improve how information is managed there needs to be an awareness of the best ways to get a worthwhile return on investment.

When an organisation goes down the path of purchasing a product, the majority of the budget is allocated towards the software, and very rarely for the implementation of the application. Through experience, it can be estimated that the implementation costs are around 40% of the entire project cost whereas the remaining 60% being spent on the software.

Using software developers can be costly. It is imperative that there is a thorough analysis and investigation into the businesses activities before the software is selected, purchased or designed.

Identifying the strategies to move forward is imperative in the initial phases as "scope creep" and expectation management needs to be kept in check. From personal experience, when an organisation decides to implement a new system it can create enthusiasm and the end users feel that they have just walked into a candy shop! There are so many functions available with new document management systems, all functions however may not be needed, or contribute to a return on their investment. The enthusiasm may also create a snowball effect where the organisation tries to achieve everything all at once and the scope of the project may increase beyond what was initially planned. Having a dedicated resource that understands the implications of what the end-user desires, and what the technical teams can produce, is imperative.

When designing the folder structure within the system, the knowledge and skill required to classify information should not be underestimated. The ability to comprehend the content of a document and place that document together with other "like" information, within a classification scheme, is critical to the successful retrieval of that document at a later date. All too often I see folder structures based on forever changing organisational structures, or worse still, structured around users names.

When it is time to implement the system all too often, the software training doesn't always meld with business processes. Users have to change their processes to fit into the sometimes-rigorous limitations of the system. Having an understanding of the organisational requirements is necessary when tailoring the training session. "Train the trainer" methods often prove valuable as in-house trainers can apply examples and processes aligned with organisational business activities.

The success of a document management system implementation, as mentioned early, can come down to the "people issues" and how well you have communicated the benefits and understood the users needs. From all parts of an organisation there needs to be a buy-in approach. Systems cannot be implemented successfully without convincing the organisation that it will assist them in everyday tasks. Management need to be proactive. Managers can help by involving staff in pre-planning by communicating directly with all staff before, during and after the change, and should consult staff when establishing new controls.

At this stage we cannot walk away from the project. There is often the belief that once installed, the system can manage itself. For a new system to provide ongoing benefits for an organisation there is a continual need for audits and maintenance of the system. Without these activities, the uncontrolled system may end up in a state of disarray within

months. As a result, the end-user can loose all confidence, and not utilise the system in the way that the system was intended or reap the benefits which will be a detriment to the success and return on investment overall

With the increasing costs associated with purchasing systems and managing information, there needs to be an even stronger emphasis placed on the important roles of records and information professionals. Having a system in place that stores information organisation wide is worthless unless each document and record is accessible, accurate and authentic. For this to happen, software vendors and end-users need assistance from records and information professionals in terms of identifying the organisation's business needs, working through their expectations from both management and the end-user and establishing the functionality needed from the new system to ensure that all information captured on the system is complete, concise and accurate.

A systematic approach to information/document management is vital to protect and preserve the organisation's information assets. The regulation of information management practices and procedures ensures that information can be more efficiently and effectively managed thus providing real and measurable benefits. The purchase of a software solution without taking into account these issues or without involving information management professionals, will not achieve this.