

Cure the records management blues

Recognize the symptoms of a records management program in need of repair



How do you identify the symptoms of an unhealthy program and work to find a cure?

Start by simply looking around you and assessing the current filing system. Do you observe physical overcrowding with overstuffed filing cabinets or cabinets lining the walls in your office? Does disorganization run rampant, with stacks of papers on desks, floors or tops of cabinets? Are employees spending too much time feverishly searching for documents? If so, your records management system could be suffering. A comprehensive RIM program will allow you to manage your current, as well as your growing number of documents.

Working with an unhealthy records and information management (RIM) program can be as damaging as not having a program at all. It can often be a silent enemy, reeking havoc on many aspects of an organizational effectiveness including worker productivity, liability and control, and even corporate intelligence. Whether you have a formal or informal records program, it is important to take a sound look at it to see if it is functioning well.

Today, more than ever, investments in improvements can be easily justified. If you can identify warning signs, find the causes and then determine how you can fix the problems, you will be well on your way to improving one of the most important assets in your organization.

Next, interview all personnel involved with the handling of information. Are employees finding the system too complex? Not knowing where or how to file a document can result in misplaced files. Or an employee may find it more comforting to copy a document and retain it in multiple locations, rather than have it lost in a bad filing system. A few employees may claim to know the "filing system," but where does that leave others when knowledgeable employees are unavailable? All this may be systematic of a workforce that is uneducated in document management procedures.

Look at your corporate goals. Does your current RIM program support your



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Getting started with a RIM program

Once you have made the decision to improve your records and information management program, you will need to get started in taking a systematic approach to implementing change.

- Inventory the records. After you have reviewed the filing system, it is time to examine what you're working with. Develop a list, or inventory, of all records existing on all types of media. Identify the "who, what, where, how and why" of the records. Who creates, receives and uses the records; what records are kept; where are they kept; how long are they kept; how are they kept; and why are they kept? By answering these questions you will find it easier to categorize the records and keep related records together. Also, categorize the record according to its stage in the life cycle. Is the record actively in use or has it served its purpose and is ready to archive or destroy? This can be a daunting task and working with an outside, experienced consultant can get you where you need to be.
- Appoint a records manager. It is important to designate an appropriate individual to oversee the records management function. A smaller organization may not have the luxury of assigning one person the sole responsibility of acting as the records manager. Consider training someone from an administrative department to handle the duties. In a large organization, a small staff may be needed. If electronic filing is a consideration for the future, the records manager should work along side the IT/IS manager in making decisions.
- Develop a records retention plan. It is important to follow the necessary legal regulations that pertain to your type of business. Medical, legal, financial, insurance, professional services - all industries have guidelines and requirements stating how long they must keep their records. It is also important to follow your schedule to maintain a neat and orderly filing system. When a record has served its purpose, it should be archived, either permanently or until it is ready to be destroyed.
- Identify your storage approach. There are many types of storage options available for

implementing and maintaining your RIM program. Examine your current needs and consider the rate of growth of your business to plan for future needs. How much physical space does your office allow for records storage? Paper storage will occupy more space, but can be less costly to maintain. Digital media such as CDs or external drives provide a larger capacity while utilizing less space, but can be prone to equipment failures. Offsite storage, through a web-based host, provides unlimited space and is accessible to multiple users at different locations, but incurs a monthly charge.

- Protect your vital records from disaster. When we think about a disaster that could destroy a business, we normally think of major disasters: fire, tornado, earthquake or flood. Smaller-scale disasters can be just as destructive, such as a computer virus, hardware failure, human error or carelessness, as well as theft or vandalism. It is essential to have a recovery plan in place to protect vital records and keep you up and running in case of disaster.



A wealth of resources is available to help educate you and establish a thorough RIM program to fit your company's needs, including the ARMA and AIIM organizations. For information and assistance on everything from filing products to professional services, turn to the experts. The SYSTEC Group (www.systemcgroup.com) provides consultation, as well as a whole suite of storage systems, software and filing supplies. ■

SYSTEC provides:

- Assessment of current procedures
- Inventory of records
- Onsite records management
- Assistance with retention planning
- Space planning
- An array of storage solutions

Avoiding pitfalls in your new RIM program

Knowing some of the potential pitfalls before implementing or updating your RIM program, can help you transition into a revitalized program.

Start by selecting a good partner. "One of the first roadblocks may be not knowing where to go for a complete records management solution," says Barbara Rike, CRM, Alliance Data Systems. There are many filing and shelving manufacturers who can provide storage options, but working with an organization that can provide a complete solution may be a better answer. In this way you assign accountability to those in charge, not to mention having added convenience.

Second, it may be difficult to project your records storage and management needs. Don't be shortsighted in planning for future growth. "Be sure

to look at all the options, from space planning to storage media," says Rike. "If electronic document storage is a consideration, it may be necessary to work with the IT department to ensure that any new components will integrate with current systems."

Third, once the RIM program is in place, it is vital that everyone follows the proper procedure for managing the information they handle daily. Comprehensive training for employees is essential. "Offer education to all of those who will be involved in managing your company's records and be sure that it is appropriately suited for each employee's level of involvement," says Rike.

These are just a few of the potential pitfalls to consider. Working with SYSTEC will help you avoid these and other pitfalls.



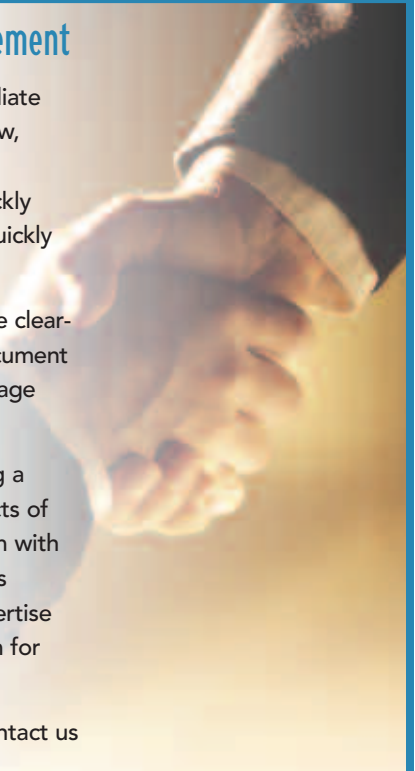
SYSTEC SOLUTIONS: Growing investment firm utilizes onsite records management

A Chicago, IL-based investment firm, which experienced very rapid growth, realized the immediate need to establish a RIM program. They needed help in consolidating their records into their new, larger corporate space and implementing a comprehensive program. They interviewed several vendors before selecting Bradford Systems, the local SYSTEC company. "The firm grew so quickly that they found it was better money spent on an outside expert to get them up and running quickly and effectively," said Kathy Connolly of Bradford Systems.

Bradford came in and established three centralized records operations: legal, accounting and the clearing operations group. They also implemented a tracking system companywide, down to the document level, to organize, track and input vital information. They moved all records from an outside storage facility and duplicated vital records to include them in the firm's new disaster recovery program.

Once in place, the firm realized they had no one to help manage their new RIM program. Being a small firm with a keen focus on their core business, they wanted to outsource the clerical aspects of managing the records and eliminate the learning curve. A team from Bradford provides the firm with ongoing records management by having 5-10 employees onsite daily, including a senior records manager. "The company trusts the quality of our work and has faith in the knowledge and expertise of our staff," said Connolly. Bradford is currently working on implementing a retention program for the firm.

For more information on how SYSTEC can help you better manage your information assets, contact us at 1-877-7SYSTEC or e-mail us at info@systecgroup.com.



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company's objectives? If your company is committed to keeping information confidential, are records kept as secure as they need to be in accordance with your privacy policies? There are many storage options that allow varied degrees of access. Also, employee flexibility may be important to your company and by having your vital records organized and easily accessible to those who use them, employees can work from remote locations such as home. Another important factor in managing your records could be compliance. Several recent events leading to the signing of new legislation, such as the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, have made compliance a top priority of many organizations. A fundamental RIM program can reduce your risks for non-compliance if called on to produce records.

A comprehensive RIM program is one of the most essential tools in the success of any business.

In today's ever-changing world of business, records and information management is crucial to the daily function of every organization. It should not be dismissed as something that only the large corporations can afford to do. Implementing a basic RIM program will help your business run more smoothly and take it to the next level. Take time to assess your situation to see if your system is healthy or may be in need of a cure. ■

Ask the

EXPERT



Ask the Expert is your opportunity to receive information management advice from some of the industry's top experts. From new technology to process improvements, you will learn ways you can capitalize on information assets. If you have a question you would like answered, go to our website at www.systecgroup.com and follow the link to Ask the Expert to post your question. Your question will be answered in about a week.

Q: What should we do to safeguard our records from fire or other natural disasters?

A: First, identify what vital and important records you would need to maintain in the event of a disaster. Vital records can be defined as those that contain information that is essential to the organization. Examples of vital records include titles, deeds, stockholder list and articles of incorporation. An important record is defined as one that contains information fundamental to the organization. Examples of important records are contracts, invoices and client files. Second, make an electronic or paper duplicate copy of both vital and important documents. Third, find a secure location to store all duplicates of the records offsite. Originals should be stored onsite in a fire-safe lockable cabinet, storage unit or fire-safe room.



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