Does Your RIM Program Need a Strategic Alignment?

With compliance and litigation concerns raising the profile for records management, records professionals have a prime opportunity to help evaluate and align business processes to meet organizational goals.

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Over the past two decades, there has been an increasing focus on the concept of strategic alignment. It has arisen from two viewpoints: focus on the customer and the need to unify disparate technology. The focus on the customer has been, beyond a doubt, the primary driver for the implementation of the strategic alignment focus in organizations. Customers, whether internal or external, are seen as the reason for the existence of the organization. Satisfying the needs of customers helps to define the structure, processes, products, and values that an organization needs to create and foster to be successful.

No less important in the age of computerization is the ability to structure technological resources so they support this customer-based focus. This is not merely an effort to streamline software applications or to implement enterprise resource planning. Rather, it is both the leveraging of existing resources and the judicious planning for future technologies aimed at achieving the goals that are derived from customer-centered objectives.

For the most part, records and information management (RIM) has been an innocent bystander of this ongoing movement. Only accidentally has records management been a part of the strategic alignment effort. But that is no longer an acceptable situation. With the increasing recognition of the importance of good RIM – especially driven by the effects of poor regulatory compliance and litigation – records managers have an excellent opportunity to become active participants in the organization’s strategic alignment efforts.

Strategic Alignment Defined
So, what is strategic alignment? Simply, strategic alignment is the link between an organization’s overall goals and the goals of each of the units that contribute to the success of those overall goals. At the core, it means that records managers must look at both the short-term and long-term objectives of the records management program in the context of the organization’s customer-centric focus. This should be a dynamic process with a quarterly or annual review of the goals of the records management program in the context of the changing strategy of the organization.

Understand the Strategy
To ensure that the records management program’s goals are truly in alignment with the overall organizational strategy requires a serious effort on the part of the records manager to understand all aspects of the strategy. One
helpful way to understand the overall context of strategic alignment is the following sequence:

Market Conditions → Strategy → Values → Organizational Structure → Systems → Staff → Style

In this model, presented by Richard Seaman in a 1995 Compensation and Benefits Review article, the records manager must understand the market conditions facing the organization. From that perspective, it should be relatively straightforward to see the resulting strategy, values, and organizational structure that are required to meet those market conditions. Then records managers need to understand how the company’s systems support the strategy. Finally, the focus turns to staff and the style of operation.

On this last point, the records manager can focus on several questions:

• **Who is doing what?** Are all the processes of the records management program clearly mapped with information storage and retrieval, and the authorized disposition of information add value to the ongoing strategic thrust of the organization. If there is no value added, then that person, function, or process needs to be examined to determine whether there are opportunities for added value. If not, they need to be refocused or eliminated.

• **Who blocks adding value?** Just as important is identifying the people, functions, and processes that have a negative impact on the overall goals of the organization, even if they help to achieve the current goals of the records management program. In every case, the records manager needs to have the vision of the overall organization in mind when creating or modifying records management functions and procedures.

A matrix structure, or a work team approach, is frequently used in strategic alignment efforts to prevent the building of silos, which inhibit communication and often lead to groups working at cross purposes and not in line with the overall goals and values of the organization. Records managers have a unique opportunity to build a network of individuals throughout the organization who sup-

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gic alignment effort. For the records management program – which is by definition a service organization – the focus on customers is always an important element for success. What the records manager can learn from the strategic alignment process is a clear definition of the different types of customers the program serves.

First and foremost are the various functions or departments within the organization. Each may have a slightly different set of needs that will require adaptation by the records management program. For example, highly transactional functions, such as accounts payable, may require the program to respond quickly to requests for information. Alternatively, the legal department may expect an exceptionally thorough search for information that is pertinent to an ongoing discovery.

However, these internal customers are not the only ones the records management program must serve. The strategically focused records manager must also keep in mind the ultimate customers of the organization. The processes and procedures of the records management program must not prevent the various functions or departments from responding to customer needs. For example, an enterprise records management system that files all information in a single repository but does not have the capability of rapid retrieval could work against the organization’s goal of resolving customer queries quickly and promptly.

**Process-Driven Approach**

Aligning the goals of a records management program with those of the overall organization can be a challenge, but records managers can learn from the multitude of approaches that have been developed to align IT processes to overall objectives.

One approach that provides an excellent framework for defining and establishing strategic alignment focuses on internal processes as the drivers for creating goals consonant with the corporate objectives. This approach – offered by Christoph Strnadl in a 2006 *Information Systems Management* article – works through four layers to achieve strategic alignment: process, information, services, and technology. Customizing it to records management provides a structured focus to align records management goals with those of the overall organization.

1. **Process:** The first element of the approach works to optimize business processes. For RIM professionals, that means that all records management processes – from inventory to retention scheduling to final disposition – must ultimately reflect and support the overall strategy. It does this in four ways:

   • It ensures that all processes are clearly and comprehensively defined and documented, with all responsible parties identified and linked to specific processes.

   Records managers must question each and every process to validate that it supports the ultimate organizational goals.

   • It couples all processes with performance indicators. Each process should have appropriate metrics linked to it so the records manager and senior management can verify that the process is contributing to the ultimate goals. Such a performance indicator could be as simple as tracking retrieval request time to ensure that it meets the required response time to satisfy external customers.

   • It clearly specifies when each process should occur. This takes the defined and measured process and places it among the ongoing activities of the organization.

   • It monitors and audits the procedures over time to ensure that the desired results are achieved. Monitoring activity should occur on a regular quarterly or annual basis, and appraisals should be coupled with both the regular and exceptional audits performed by external or internal auditors.

2. **Information:** This process-driven approach focuses on the core element of records management – information. Peter Drucker probably said it best when he defined information as “data endowed with relevance and purpose.” Although many of the elements of this component arise external to records management, the records manager can influence many of these aspects by creating excellent procedures and processes. The information layer includes:

   • The assurance that all types of information are clearly defined and classified. In records management parlance, it means, in
simplest terms, the records retention schedules are complete and up-to-date and that the organization has a standard set of classifications around which to organize its information.

- Sufficient analysis and understanding to ensure that the flow of information is unimpeded. Special attention is required to ensure that transitions of information from external to internal sources are accomplished without delay and avoid errors or modification.

  - Information that is clearly and completely available for decision processes. A key element of strategic alignment is effective decision-making. Records managers can be especially helpful in this aspect with their comprehensive view of the variety of information the organization maintains and its location.

  - Preservation of key information that is important for the ongoing and historical management of the organization of business. This element of knowledge management is a natural component of any records management program. The key focus will be to ensure that the preservation reflects corporate goals and is adjusted as strategies change.

3. Services: This element focuses on services – creating and managing them so they foster the organization’s goals and do not impede progress. Because records management is a service organization, this should not be a major challenge. The components of this layer include:

  - A comprehensive description of each of the services offered by the records management program. This differs from the description and definition of the processes employed by the records management program. In many cases, the same process may be used to accomplish a variety of services. The intention here is to make clear to customers (internal or external) what can be expected from the records management program.

  - Demonstrated agreement between the content and aims of the services offered and relevant standards. Records management is fortunate to have a foundational standard, ISO15489-1 Information and Documentation – Records Management – Part E General, that provides high-level guidance about the services that should be offered by an effective records management program.

  - Specifically defined quality assurance measures and (if appropriate) service-level agreements that clearly reflect the overall organization’s goals. These elements allow the records manager to measure whether the programs and services require modification or improvement to meet service expectations.

  - Clearly defined service availability. Frequently, records management programs are limited by a sparse number of staff. Whether there is a single person running the program or a substantial complement, it is part of the customer-centric focus of strategic alignment to inform them of when and where the services can be requested and will be delivered. Service availability needs to be in line with corporate goals.

4. Technology: The final layer of the process-driven approach to strategic alignment focuses on the technology available to support the overall goals. In particular, it frequently works to leverage existing resources in new ways to achieve specific objectives. This layer is probably the most important layer for the future of records management in any organization. Without technological support, it is impossible to provide good records management services to an organization. The components of this layer include:

  - Comprehensive specifications for using technology to manage the information under the custody of records management. Most importantly, it means the ability to define the software applications or the enterprise records management system that will augment the personal efforts of the records manager, records coordinators, and individual staff members. Without adequate technological support, no records management program can be successful – particularly for the management of e-mail, files created by desktop applications, and the new requirements for discovery demanded by the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure.

For the records manager, the challenge is to be a leader and proponent of strategic alignment goals – not just for records management, but also for senior management, records coordinators, and all staff.
• The deployment of technological resources for records management to reach all appropriate staff members. Records management cannot support the overall strategic alignment goals if its technological support is limited solely to the activities of the records management function and staff. In this computer-driven business world, all staff who create and use digital information must have adequate software support to be able to manage information in a structured and effective fashion.

• Technology that is continuously updated. Senior management must understand that the strategic value of information requires that the software and hardware used by a records management program cannot be allowed to become obsolete. Most glaringly, a records management program cannot match long-term strategic goals if its technology stance does not include the ability to migrate digital information as storage technologies morph. Records managers must work diligently to ensure that their technological tools remain up-to-date and, with IT, validate that any new software or hardware will promote the goals of both records management and of the overall organization.

Leadership Success
The secret to success in strategic alignment is leadership. It must begin with the CEO or senior management of the organization – but it cannot stop there. There needs to be a cascading set of goals from top to bottom that are both supportive and complementary. For the records manager, the challenge is to be a leader and proponent of strategic alignment goals – not just for records management, but also for senior management, records coordinators, and all staff. Because records management touches all aspects of an organization, a records manager can contribute significantly to achieving both records management and overall goals. 

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