



RIM HEALTH CHECK

Auditing an Organization's **RIM PROGRAM**

A RIM program audit is a vital checkup that every organization needs to ensure that it is operating at its unique, optimal health level

Janice Anderson

When people are sick, their bodies experience an information management crisis. Essentially, the critical supporting components of the body's defense mechanisms are not getting the right information at the right time to facilitate the best possible reaction to the intruders.

An organization – whether small, medium, or large; government, publicly traded, or private – is like a body: it can also get sick. The records and information that course through it each day must get to the right people at the right time in order to support the organization's optimum health.

Just as people go to the doctor for checkups to ensure their good health and for diagnosis, treatment, and monitoring when they are ill, undergoing a records and information management (RIM) audit provides an organization the necessary checkup, diagnosis, and treatment to ensure its good health.

In metaphorical terms, if records and information – both physical and electronic – are the life-giving blood in an organization's body, then the conduits, or programs, by which they flow are the organization's circulatory system. A RIM audit is a critical dissection and evaluation of the processes that manage records and information flows throughout their lifecycle.

Defining the Stakeholders and Drivers

Like people, every organization is unique. Each has its own personality, objectives, stakeholders, drivers, and performance measures. The audit team must identify and understand each of these elements in order to shape the audit to meet the organization's unique needs.

A significant step in the audit is to identify the stakeholders involved in and affected by the RIM program and those stakeholders' drivers. (See Figure 1.)

Recognizing the stakeholders and understanding their diverse drivers will

provide insight into the needs driving the RIM program audit and empower the audit team with the ability to connect with the stakeholders in the context of their functions.

Although everyone within an organization creates records and information and is responsible for that content, the audit team must identify and use key personnel, or champions, from within each stakeholder group to keep the process moving. This step requires buy-in from these individuals – a task that can be handled now that their organizational drivers have been uncovered and the auditors can communicate with them on their level and in their language.

At the Core This article

- ▶ Defines a RIM program audit
- ▶ Identifies the drivers and stakeholders involved
- ▶ Discusses the process involved in performing a RIM health check

Beginning the Audit Process

After determining the “why” of the RIM program audit process by identifying the drivers and stakeholders, determining the “how” of the process must begin. In basic terms, the RIM program health check consists of defining drivers, gathering data, and developing an action plan. (See Figure 2.)

Building an Audit Team

Understanding the drivers and stakeholders will provide the framework within which to create the audit team. The organization's unique characteristics will help guide its creation.

A public sector audit team may include

- Organization records manager and support staff

- Industry RIM expert(s)
- Other non-RIM program staff such as stakeholders and focus groups members
- Executive-level representation

A private sector audit team may include:

- A core team comprising an organizational records manager, project manager, and representatives from legal and IT
- Industry RIM expert(s)
- Advisory committee comprising functional management as stakeholders and subject-matter experts

The makeup of the audit team is an important consideration. As shown above, finding individuals with functional expertise in information technology, legal, and records management is a great start. Ideally, a handful of end users should be involved, if only to validate the approach and language. Small groups of quiet, supportive advisors from across the organization can go a long way toward enabling the team to reach the right audience in the right way to get honest and accurate answers about current practices. The use of outside RIM experts can be helpful as well. They can provide objective counsel regarding practices at other, similar organizations in the given industry or segment, and – by virtue of their expertise alone – they can provide reasonable context for launching a RIM program audit.

Identifying Elements to Evaluate

Once the audit team has been assembled, the next step is to identify which elements of the RIM program to evaluate. Elements commonly measured include the following:

- Retention and vital records schedules
- Access and security controls

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- Classification and indexing schemes (e.g., file plans and metadata models)
- Disposition procedures
- Records and information storage processes, tools, and environments
- Ease of access and retrieval of information
- Legal holds process
- Organizational understanding of RIM
- Roles and responsibilities related to RIM

Auditors must ensure that the retention schedule is structured in a logical way (typically, this entails a process-oriented, or functional, structure). When reviewing the legal research, the audit team should spot-check citations. It should be loaded into an electronic system for use, and any manual classification procedures should be well-documented and easily understood. Organizations with the most successfully implemented retention schedules often have workgroup-level file plans (or mini-taxonomies) that identify the information that is relevant for each workgroup to manage in its daily work. Disposition procedures, as well as the storage locations (from warehouses to server rooms to backup tapes), also should be reviewed by the auditors to confirm that the information is safe, accessible, and easy to retrieve.

Many end users understand the basics of how to respond to a hold order – but they may not understand the overall lifecycle of information and their own and others' roles in managing it. The audit team should not hesitate to ask respondents to demonstrate their understanding and knowledge as part

Figure 1: Common Organizational Stakeholders and Drivers

Executive Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhancing and maintaining corporate image and reputation • Maximizing shareholder value • Ensuring legislative compliance • Avoiding sanctions and legal punishment
Middle Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maximizing the customer experience • Managing operational costs • Getting the job done efficiently
Legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimizing legal exposure • Managing litigation costs
Human Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Optimizing the acquisition, development, and use of talent • Mitigating employer risk
Accounting/Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring regulatory compliance (e.g., Sarbanes-Oxley)
Information Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabling work processes via technology • Managing IT expenditures
Records Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protecting the organization's information collections • Delivering information management expertise • Enabling the management of the information lifecycle
End Users/ General Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding and retrieving critical information • Using information to get the job done

of the audit process.

Choosing the Right Tools

Just as a physical exam requires specialized medical equipment like a stethoscope, the RIM program audit requires the use of specialized tools to evaluate the health of the organization's RIM processes. These resources might include:

- Published standards:

- ISO 9000:2005 *Quality Management Systems – Fundamentals and Vocabulary*
- ISO 9001:2000 *Quality Management Systems – Requirements*
- ISO 15489-1: 2001 *Information and Documentation – Records Management – Part I: General*
- ISO/TR 15489-2:2001 *Inform-*

ation and Documentation –
Records Management – Part 2:
Guidelines

– ISO 23081-1:2006 Metadata for
Records – Part I: Principles

– DoD 5015.2-STD, Department of
Defense Records Management
Program DoD 5015.2-STD

– Model Requirements for the
Management of Electronic Records
(MoReq)

- Non-profit guidelines: The Sedona Conference’s Sedona Guidelines for Managing Information and Records in the Electronic Age
- ARMA International’s Risk Profiler Self-Assessment for RIM
- Metrics, statistics, and other reports generated internally
- External benchmarks and industry studies
- Interview questionnaires and surveys

Auditors should become familiar with the suite of tools and sources available so that the records manager and a trusted advisor can create a RIM program audit “toolkit” that specifically meets the organization’s unique needs. Choosing the right tools often involves selecting the things that are most suited to the organization’s needs from several possible sources. Applying a single source or tool may overlook some of the key elements that an organization needs to measure or consider – or may attempt to measure them in a way that does not fit the program’s audit needs.

In developing this toolkit, many of the elements of a desired state for RIM will emerge. This desired state will be used later in the audit process to compare against results and to build a roadmap.

Knowing Where to Look

The team has identified the program elements that should be evaluated and the tools for assessing the situation. Where

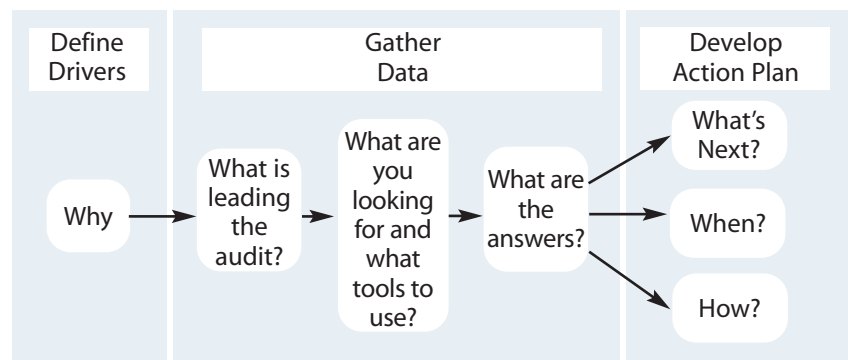
does it go in the organization to find a realistic picture of how things work? And, further, how does the team get those people to be honest regarding how they handle information, comply with processes, and understand the overall program? This aspect of the RIM program audit is both art and science.

One consideration when choosing the organizational audience is to understand where the mission-critical processes are executed. What support functions assist this area? Who is their liaison for managing records, if they have one?

In a short time, responses can be statistically arranged to show areas in need of improvement as well as to illuminate properly functioning processes. For instance, if a large percentage of respondents answer the question, “Are you able to find requested information stored on a server or in a file room in a short amount of time?” with “not at all,” an opportunity for improvement clearly exists.

A good questionnaire should make sense to the people answering

Figure 2. Illustration of the RIM Program Health Check Process



Although a successful RIM program audit will include data gathered from a cross-section of the organization, it should include representatives from those workgroups that execute the organization’s core processes and reflect its reason for existing.

Knowing How to Look

There are three primary methodologies for conducting the RIM program health check: questionnaires, interviews, and group sessions. The most efficient, effective audits use a combination of two or more of them:

1. **Questionnaires:** A questionnaire is a good methodology to use if there is a tight time budget. Administered electronically and worded correctly, this technique excels at quickly identifying “hot spots” within the organi-

zation. In a short time, responses can be statistically arranged to show areas in need of improvement as well as to illuminate properly functioning processes. For instance, if a large percentage of respondents answer the question, “Are you able to find requested information stored on a server or in a file room in a short amount of time?” with “not at all,” an opportunity for improvement clearly exists.

2. **Interviews:** The interview is an effective approach, as it can capture all sorts of information related to the audit. A rule of thumb: the interview team needs four ears, not two. Interviewing in pairs permits one to gather detailed notes and the other to actively listen. The interview also presents an opportunity to conduct a Q&A session, which educates both interviewer and interviewee. While

interviewing has many benefits, its primary disadvantage is the time and resources it requires.

3. *Group sessions:* Facilitating a group through a one- or two-hour discussion around a few key areas of the RIM program audit can provide deep insight into specific areas needing attention. Managed well, this can be an especially useful method for collecting large amounts of information in a compressed time schedule. It also provides an opportunity to educate the audience about how they are managing their information relative to how they should be managing it.

Gathering information by using a combination of a limited set of interviews with a survey questionnaire, possibly followed by a few group data-gathering sessions, is a reasonable approach.

Using Results to Develop a Blueprint

The final stages of the RIM program health check are the diagnosis and the prescription – or the analysis and the path forward.

Analyzing the Results

Analyze the results to delineate what works and what needs improvement. Consider the size of the gaps between the organization's performance and its desired state. Often, problems cluster in certain areas and around specific processes; the audit team must dig into the results to understand the root causes of these problems.

Identifying and Prioritizing Solutions

After the results are analyzed and the root causes of the problems are identified, the expert team should be gathered to brainstorm methods for improving the problem areas. It is advisable to use a professional facilitator



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and an external RIM expert for this stage of the audit to help ensure that the solutions are generated with the benefit of additional expertise, perspective, and counsel – and that they align to the problems.

With solutions in hand, the organization can begin to prioritize them by asking the following questions about each one:

- How rapidly can the solution be implemented?
- What other solutions are linked to this one? Which ones are necessary predecessors; which can be worked in parallel?
- What expertise is in place for solving this vs. what expertise is needed?
- What will the cost (in terms of dollars and resources) be?
- How high is the risk of doing nothing?
- What value will the solution bring to the organization?

Some of the solutions will turn out to be easy, quick fixes – commonly called the “low-hanging fruit.” However, others may require some additional analysis or special projects. All should

be addressed according to their priority based on risk, timing, value, and cost. As these solutions are grouped into an overall plan, a blueprint for the RIM program's continuous improvement plan will emerge.

Reporting the Results

No doubt, the audit team has collected a wealth of information and data. And while the audit team may be tempted to share it all, understanding the audience and its drivers are key to the team determining what portion of the key findings and action plan the audience members will want and need to know.

If reporting to the board of directors, the team should keep the presentation high-level and short, emphasizing the key components that need to be addressed to promote compliance and efficiency. If presenting to the end users, it should focus the report on the tasks that they need to perform in order to find their information more easily – and share the consequences of their non-compliance.

Unless specified by the organization's governing rules, there is little reason to make the full report available outside of a small audience of decision-makers, influencers, and potential (or current) project sponsors. Broad communication of the solution blueprint

(or, over time, the project “brand” that emerges from that blueprint) is a great idea. However, potentially incriminating details about the RIM program’s weaker spots do not need to be available throughout the organization.

Ensuring a Positive Prognosis

The program that defines how records and information should be managed as they flow throughout the organization is vitally important. Whatever the motivation for the audit – improving regulatory compliance, increasing business efficiency, or enhancing corporate image – all are dependent on a healthy RIM program.

The RIM program audit might seem an intimidating undertaking, much as a doctor visit is for many people. However, like going to the doctor, engaging in this organizational checkup is much better than doing nothing and simply hoping not to get blindsided by calamity.

Performing a well-designed, well-implemented RIM program audit is a positive experience. And, just as doctors often will reward a child for his bravery with a sticker, a RIM program audit will provide an organization with rewarding opportunities to improve its program and contribute to its own good health. ■

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