

Implementing EDMS: Putting People First

Migrating to an electronic document management system is more than just installing new software. User buy-in is of vital importance for companies who want a smooth transition to a successful system.

Lynette Downing, CRM



While choosing the right electronic document management system (EDMS) software application for an organization is important, the technology itself is less important than the people who will use it and the business processes it will support. Implementing EDMS software and expecting the technology to change organizational culture would be a mistake. The old 80-20 rule applies to implementation; for the most success, focus just 20 percent of the efforts on the technology and 80 percent on the cultural issues.

At the Core

This article

- ▶ Describes the difference between paper-based and electronic records management cultures
- ▶ Outlines the key steps in implementing an EDMS
- ▶ Highlights the advantages of involving end-users in the implementation process to increase employee buy-in

An implementation can be judged successful when the system captures the official records of the firm, the records are managed throughout their life cycle, and the EDMS has become so ingrained in the firm's culture that employees can't imagine working any other way.

That is because document management is a part of every employee's job. Whereas filing was once the specialty of file clerks, the function of saving documents into an EDMS repository requires that all users – not just the records staff – know where to file and how to classify information. It's no longer about individual filing systems that work for the individual until the completed files are delivered to the door of the records management department. It's about having a stan-

dardized filing methodology that everyone follows from the point of creation and throughout a document's use. Saving information correctly so it can be retrieved by anyone who needs access to it is the primary goal.

The Discipline of Records Management

Without a records management program, users typically have their own systems for filing with their own indexing/retrieval rules, and retention is applied inconsistently as users make their own decisions on how long to retain records. A typical records management program introduces users to the discipline associated with guidelines on organizing records by record series, policies on records retention, procedures for boxing and later destroying records, and so on. In the paper world, records management staff often take control at this point, toward the end of the life cycle.

An EDMS introduces yet another discipline. While traditional paper systems focus on the file level, an EDMS focuses on the document level. It requires users, at the point of creation, to make a records classification decision.

Not all users will welcome the discipline needed for them to participate in the successful implementation and use of an EDMS. That is why top management support is critical to ensure that those who don't are convinced to comply or seek employment somewhere where they can continue to work with traditional paper systems. This is just a reality to be faced. Not everyone will be able to make the cultural shift.

Keys to a Successful EDMS Implementation

1. Make the Process Transparent

In most organizations, an EDMS may require users to choose a folder in a file plan, pick from a favorites list, or choose a document type – each of which has a retention period associated with it – when the document is first saved. While

this is extremely important, the process should be as transparent as possible to the users.

The process of classifying records into an EDMS repository and declaring them (making an editable document into a read-only record) needs to be so ingrained into the daily work process that it becomes invisible. Users will resist extra steps, so compliance needs to be built into the process itself whenever possible. Emphasis should be placed on efficiency, so a conscious effort should be made to minimize the number of clicks and keystrokes needed to save or retrieve documents. This means designing the user interface to get users to index documents accurately during the save process and making it easy to apply retention rules.

This may result in a split in responsibilities with users classifying documents and records staff declaring records. In this scenario, the users decide where documents are to be filed in the file plan when they first save it (i.e., classifying the document). The same indexing information is then used to classify the records and apply retention to them in the file plan. Records administration staff, not the end users, actually declare the documents as records and associate the documents to a particular folder in the file plan. The users are not required to do any extra steps, but a heavier burden is put on the records staff to perform the process. Retention periods are then applied to the records in the file plan, which are based on the firm's record series.

2. Manage User Expectations

One of the most important aspects of implementing a new system is managing user expectations. Psychologically, it is always better to undersell a system and to over-deliver the product than it is to oversell a system and under-deliver the product. If users are told the system is the next best thing to sliced bread, they are going to set their expectations high and likely be disappointed if the system doesn't deliver as promised.

Tell users exactly what to expect, when to expect it, and how it will affect their jobs. Just as important as telling users what is being delivered is telling them what is not being delivered.

It may also help users to know that immediately following the implementation, it is expected that productivity may actually decrease as adjustments are made and they learn the system. But, once users reach a comfort level with the EDMS, productivity should rebound and begin to improve over the pre-implementation period.

In addition, implement policies that will help users understand changing expectations. For example, if an outcome of the implementation is switching from paper to electronic as the official record format, a policy must be developed stating the EDMS repository is to hold the official records of the organization and that using the system is mandatory. These statements clearly define what is expected of users.

It is not possible to over-communicate what is happening during an EDMS implementation. People are naturally curious and want to know how they are going to be affected. If the correct message isn't sent, the wrong one can take over. Use internal newsletters, company intranets, e-mail updates, and staff meetings to keep everyone informed on what is happening and when. Keep in mind that if one person has a question, others probably do, too, so share answers. Keep information flowing and set the right expectations.

3. Focus on People

The easiest way to get people to adopt EDMS is to show them the benefits of using it both on a personal level, which is the first thing they will want to know, and on an organizational level. Some of the benefits to emphasize are:

- Improved searching capabilities that will help them find information more quickly and easily
- Improved sharing of documents,

including multi-user access to the same document

- Increased security – at the document level instead of the file level
- Improved client service, especially when client callbacks could be eliminated by reviewing information quickly on screen instead of searching for paper files

- Improved vital records protection and disaster recovery because more information is backed up
- Better reporting because the information is in a centralized repository with a full audit trail
- Reduced file storage space, supplies, and equipment
- Overall – better decision-making based on better recordkeeping practices

Involve the right people in the change process. While identifying and refining department processes, ask representatives from all ranks to participate, from the manager to the secretarial support. Include not only those who have good attitudes and are willing to work at making processes better, but also a few resisters who can be coached so their resistance will be reduced and buy-in obtained early in the process.

Involving the right people in the pilot group to test the system and how it supports their business processes is also important. This group needs to consist of users who are willing and able to provide feedback weekly so the project can continue to move forward. Have this group work on real projects to emulate a production environment as much as possible.

Refine the system based on the feedback from the pilot group, as well as from focus groups made up of staff members from each department with representatives ranging from administrative to senior managers.

4. Focus on Processes

When implementing EDMS, there are two approaches to handling process changes. The first is to customize the software to handle existing business processes, and the second is to change the process to accommodate the technology. Customizing software takes time and costs money, not only during the initial design stage but every time an upgrade is done, especially when integrating with other systems. Since most business processes will be

It is not possible to over-communicate what is happening during an EDMS implementation.



revamped to accommodate working more electronically, consider changing the processes before customizing the software.

A considerable amount of time must be spent outlining processes – and that involves interviewing people because much of the current process information often resides in people’s heads rather than formalized in writing.

Flowchart current processes, but also spend time detailing how processes will be handled once EDMS is implemented and how users will work electronically. Identify how all information currently being captured in paper files will be captured electronically in the EDMS repository. This requires reviewing all sources of documentation – for example, from in-house systems, from clients or third parties, MS Office documents, faxes, e-mail messages, and Internet research sources.

5. Train on Processes

Focusing on training users to use the technology is a great beginning, but training needs to go beyond the software. Users need to know how to save and search for documents, but just as much time, if not more, should be spent training users on how they will use the software. To feel comfortable with a new system, users have to know at an individual level how technology will affect their daily processes and their given role in the organization. Everyone understands “WIIFM” (What’s In It for Me?), so be sure to walk a few footsteps in the shoes of the users to understand their perspectives when rolling out EDMS.

6. Keep Sight of the Big Picture

Be careful not to give departments or business units everything they ask for in isolation. The project manager has to weigh the requests of one department with the overall standards of the organization. Giving each department exactly what they want can lead to islands of information that create fragmented systems or multiple applications that don’t talk to each other. There needs to be a

coordinated effort to reduce redundancy yet maintain the necessary level of information sharing and process efficiency.

7. Understand Changing Communication Dynamics

Communication systems change as work is created electronically. Electronic notification increases as work flows

from one person to another in production processes. E-mail is a large contributor to this, but other databases can be used to communicate progress, especially communication tools such as those used by workflow (or business process management) applications. Business process management applications rely heavily on routing/managing electronic documents and add automated rules to how work flows between roles during a specific process. EDMS usually changes basic workflow patterns but not nearly as much as implementing a workflow engine would.

Work group dynamics change as users are able to share electronic information easily. Multiple people can view the same document stored in a central repository without having to make multiple paper copies or without having to be in the same location. Collaboration increases as electronic documents are attached to e-mail messages and shared with both internal and external parties. Groups that may not have interacted with each other previously may now have access to the same information and find collaboration helpful. This causes the traditional boundaries between groups and departments to disappear.

EDMS can even change the relationship between managers and subordinates. In the paper world, users create documents in isolation at their desks. In the electronic world, once a document is saved into the EDMS repository, it is viewable by all other users (unless document access is restricted). Managers can view the progress on a job much earlier in the production cycle by having access to all documents in the centralized repository. They can usually identify workflow problems earlier by periodically reviewing work in the system instead of later when a paper file is delivered. A word of caution: There is a fine line between monitoring and micro-managing. Users cannot feel stifled by having someone always watching over their shoulder. They have to have enough room to do their job. As with anything, it is a balancing act between being too watchful and not watchful enough.

Work group dynamics change as users are able to share electronic information easily.



An EDMS also creates more accountability. Because an EDMS system maintains a history of all activities taking place related to a document (e.g., save, edit, print, and attach to e-mail), user activity can be monitored more easily. This audit trail might be used to hold users accountable within the organization, or it might be used to show a document's chain of custody or its trustworthiness in a court of law. There is much more operational information available in an EDMS than was ever possible in a paper-based system. The information can be leveraged by the firm as well as outside parties.

Build It So They Will Come

There is always the question, "If we build it, will they come?" when implementing EDMS. The answer is obviously "no"; they will not use it just because

it is there. They have to have a vested interest in using it. Understanding the people and process issues will go a long way toward gaining that interest. Technology by itself does not fix poor processes, create motivating jobs, or necessarily solve department productiv-

ity issues. But combining the technology with skilled people who understand how a system is used to manage documents/records during the routine activities of everyday work can lead to improved processes, more motivated employees, and better productivity. ■

Lynette A. Downing, CRM, is the records and information manager for HLB Tautges Redpath, Ltd. and has more than 15 years of experience in developing RIM solutions. She may be reached at downing@hlbtr.com.

References

- Connor, Patrick E., Linda K. Lake, and Richard W. Stackman. *Managing Organizational Change*, 3d Ed. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003.
- Harrington, H. James. *Business Process Improvement: The Breakthrough Strategy for Total Quality, Productivity, and Competitiveness*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991.
- Sutton, Michael J. D. *Document Management for the Enterprise*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1996.