

Electronic Records Management on a Shoestring: Three Case Studies

Developing and implementing a full-fledged, certified ERM system requires time, resources, and a big budget. But the records manager who takes low-cost, high-value steps can reach a successful outcome.

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Business entities, both private and public, have come to appreciate information as an asset, and they realize that it must be managed effectively to provide the maximum benefit to business efficiency and economy. However, resources for managing records – including human, financial, and electronic – have not always been generously supported in business budgets. Records managers often face an uphill battle to incorporate electronic records management (ERM) into their programs.

But starting with almost nothing in the way of basic tools and funds is not as daunting as it may seem. With a bit of ingenuity, a records manager can build a more effective program than if he or she started with a huge budget.

Integrating ERM is not primarily a battle with management for resources; it is a culture war for the hearts and

minds of the people who create and use records. People are generally comfortable with the way they do business and are usually skeptical of “outsiders” seeking to “improve” the process. Cooperation of the business staff is what the records manager and the IT staff need to successfully implement ERM. Converting a manual program piecemeal to an electronic records program may seem frustrating at the outset, but the extra time it takes allows the records manager to

plan carefully, spend very little money initially, and start with small projects or changes that have a greater chance of success than a huge enterprise-wide initiative.

Low-Budget Ways to Implement ERM Programs

Case Study 1: Digitizing Bank Examiner Work Papers

The records manager in a federal banking agency was facing the challenge of converting a manual records system to an ERM system. She sought a business unit that was already doing business electronically. The bank examination staff was using a software package, developed in conjunction with several other federal bank regulators, to create and store examination work papers. The creation and preservation of complete, accurate, and trustworthy bank examiner work papers are paramount because bank ratings depend on exami-

At the Core

This article

- ▶ discusses implementing an ERM program with limited resources
- ▶ presents three case studies that illustrate ways to do this
- ▶ offers low-budget strategies for implementing ERM programs

nation results. The records manager asked the IT staff to develop a small set of computer code so that when a set of examiner work papers was saved by a bank examiner, a copy would be automatically sent to a folder controlled by the records manager. IT added appropriate codes to ensure that only the records manager had access to the folder.

The records manager did not consider the new procedure a bona fide ERM system. However, the project achieved several goals. The records manager gained control of an important set of electronic records. She established a working relationship with IT and the business unit. The bank examiners were able to send electronic records to the records manager

of records management and related them to the general work of the audience. In another session, business units were asked to describe their business processes, explain interactions with other business lines, list the documentation created or received, and recommend the length of time the information needed to be available.

It was important to schedule the sessions at a regular time and limit them to one hour each. If the discussion was not completed in an hour, participants returned to the subject in the next session. The records management team also took notes and circulated them for comment either via e-mail or at a subsequent session.

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through a seamless process. She used the metadata developed for the records in this project as the foundation for agency-wide metadata standards. The project cost a fraction of what the agency would eventually pay for an ERM system. By undertaking a small, low-budget project, the records manager was able to demonstrate that the ERM system was workable and to make a more informed recommendation for an enterprise-wide system.

Case Study 2: Implementing ERM in a Small Federal Agency

Prior to implementing an ERM program, a records manager will want to find out what other people in the organization do. When developing a records management program in a small federal agency, a staff of two set up a series of one-hour “show-and-tell” sessions for work groups in various business units. One session featured the fundamentals

The goals were to

- develop records retention schedules that would accommodate paper and electronic records
- design and implement the beginnings of an ERM program that would meet the needs of the business units
- give the business units a sense of ownership in the records management policies and procedures

The records management team did not impose a new process; it reached solutions through collaboration. Understanding how the business units operated and establishing rapport were vital factors in the success of the records management program because, as both providers and users of records, the business units were its major clientele.

The records management staff’s collaborative approach did not add to the

agency budget. It asked for time in small increments, making it easier for people to commit to the project. In addition, the agency did not have to find a sizeable extra appropriation for a consultant or ask busy staff to give up large blocks of time. All participants were better informed about agency business processes, making changes easier to implement effectively.

Case Study 3: Presenting the Case to Management

A third low-budget technique for managing electronic files was undertaken by the law librarian of the legal division of another federal agency. Technically speaking, not directly part of a records management program, this project prepared the way for later implementation of ERM. The agency had a long-standing central filing system, managed by a records section consisting of file clerks. The legal division sent paper versions of all material deemed to be records to the records section. The law library retained paper copies of some materials sent to the records section in a part of the library called “Legal Records.” The division used a software package for creating synopses of legal cases.

The attorneys created all their documents in a word processing program, but they received many paper documents from outside the agency. The attorneys spent much time searching Legal Records for information relevant to their current projects; they also complained about having to retype sections of documents that were not available electronically.

The law librarian began asking attorneys how their work processes could be improved. She went to demonstrations of newly marketed records management applications. She gathered information on the several operating systems used in the agency to produce the documents received in the legal division and researched product capabilities, costs, and analyses online. She reviewed the division’s software product, which featured several functions that the division

was not using, such as scanning and electronic document storage. She reported the advantages, disadvantages, and costs of implementing several systems. Ultimately, she recommended expanding the use of the software package already in limited use on the basis of its flexibility to meet the needs of the legal staff, its shorter learning curve, cost of implementation, and track record for service. When she presented her carefully documented request to management, it signed off because the plan was deftly prepared and credible.

The law librarian did not consider her document capture and storage system a bona fide records management system. She was aware of the early efforts to upgrade her agency's records management program and of the fact that her division would eventually be part of that program. When it came time to integrate the division into the agency's ERM program, the staff was already informed and comfortable with storing, protecting, and accessing electronic records.

Small Success = Solid Foundation

Records managers have assets that do not require large staffs and generous budgets to build. Credibility is one of the most valuable, and it should never be squandered. Records managers establish credibility by being current on the principles, practices, laws, and regulations relating to ERM. They are careful to plan wisely for any project; thinking through to the final result and considering what steps will reach that result. Planning, of course, is much less expensive than fixing. Managing expectations for the outcome of a records project is a primary responsibility and requires resisting the temptation to over-promise or to allow unintended growth of the project. Achieving a small success establishes a solid foundation for future projects.

Another important tactic for records managers is to sell the positive business benefits of ERM. So much is written

about risk management that it is easy to forget the benefits. Managers need efficient, economical access to authentic, trustworthy records in order to make timely decisions. Staff must complete work in a timely, efficient manner. Public organizations need, or want, to make information about their programs and services available to the public. Attorneys should defend the organization in court and protect the rights of individuals. One set of electronic records, effectively captured and well-managed, can be used for a multitude of purposes by any number of people simultaneously.

Today, greater accountability is demanded of public and private company employees and managers because of corporate malfeasance. As organizations convert to electronic commerce and business processes, the records detailing agreements within and between/among organizations and documenting who did what, when, and why, are created in electronic systems. Electronic media allow faster, more encompassing access to information that formerly had to be searched manually, either one filing system at a time or by multiple staff members assigned to one task.

Achieving a Successful Outcome

Several interim measures are available to records managers with few resources. They can begin by providing business users with definitions of records and the recordkeeping requirements that apply to their business functions. Then they can persuade business units to store electronic records in a secure location, either by dedicating a separate system to records storage or by having IT provide read-only access in a

separate location within an extant system. They can help business units develop a standard minimum set of qualities (metadata) to describe records in electronic systems. They also can explain that limiting acceptable file formats accommodates storage and records retrieval.

Effective communication is vital and inexpensive. Records managers must always consult the business users when developing the metadata. Even though most of the metadata collection will be transparent, the users must be comfortable and familiar with the terms used for gaining access to the records. Soliciting user groups among system end users ensures that necessary changes can be made and engenders cooperation with the implementation. Records managers should use the ideas that have merit and explain why other suggestions cannot or will not be incorporated. Those invested in a system will be more likely to use it when it is implemented.

Records managers have incentive to work with IT and the business unit to modify or build recordkeeping capability into current and new systems. They need to cooperate to identify the certification criteria for their organization's ERM systems. Doing so will save time, money, and stress during the conversion to a certified ERM system because many of the necessary features will be in place both culturally and technically.

No program comes to fruition in one economic and efficient step. A full-fledged certified ERM system will take time to develop and implement and will cost a substantial sum. The records manager who takes incremental, low-cost, high-value steps will contribute significantly to a successful outcome. ■

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