WHITE PAPER

DOCUMENT MANAGEMENT, RECORDS MANAGEMENT, IMAGE
MANAGEMENT, WORKFLOW MANAGEMENT…WHAT? – THE I.D.E.A

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It's no wonder that the end users are confused when the vendors' definitions for the above software applications are often confusing, overlapping and sometimes downright misleading. It is patently obvious that some software vendors write their documentation long before they actually produce the product. Comparing the functionality of the "glossy" to the actual product can sometimes be more than disheartening.

What is true is that the application areas of document management, records management, image management and workflow management do overlap. It is however, also true that they are essentially different applications. The fact that all of these applications may share the same database engine, end-user environment (e.g., Windows), and network is irrelevant. These are technical details.

Generally speaking, Records Management Systems (RMS) manage information about file covers and paper documents. Document Management Systems (DMS) manage electronic documents produced by word-processing packages, e-mail packages, spreadsheet packages, etc. Image Management Systems, (IMS) manage electronic images of documents, drawings, pictures etc. Workflow Management Systems (WMS) know about standard procedures and control the work associated with projects. Note that a project can be virtually anything from a single complaint letter received to a proposal to build an oil refinery.

Any of these applications can be run on its own.

Any two or more of these applications can be run on the same network, "exchanging" or "sharing" information.

Any one of these applications may also be "extended" by the addition of functionality from one or more of the other applications. Thus, we may have a records management package with some elements of a workflow management package or we may have a document management package that also captures, stores, indexes, displays and prints images.

The common link in all of these applications is the term "document". In its broadest and most correct meaning, a document is any single logical item of information being managed, a unique named or numbered entity. Thus a 5-page letter is a document. A 10,000-page environmental impact study is a document. An image produced by scanning a color picture of a football team is a document. An Excel spreadsheet is a document. A 3 line E-mail message inviting you to lunch is a document. A cancelled cheque is a document.

Each of our above four applications, (RMS, DMS, IMS and WMS), is concerned with documents as carriers of information. A database of documents is normally at the heart of all these applications. Obviously, in any organization, the same document may well be referenced, stored and indexed by two or more of these applications. For example, a written request for the supply of product would be registered by our records management system when first received and then "captured" and processed by our workflow management system until such time as the request has been validated and the product supplied.
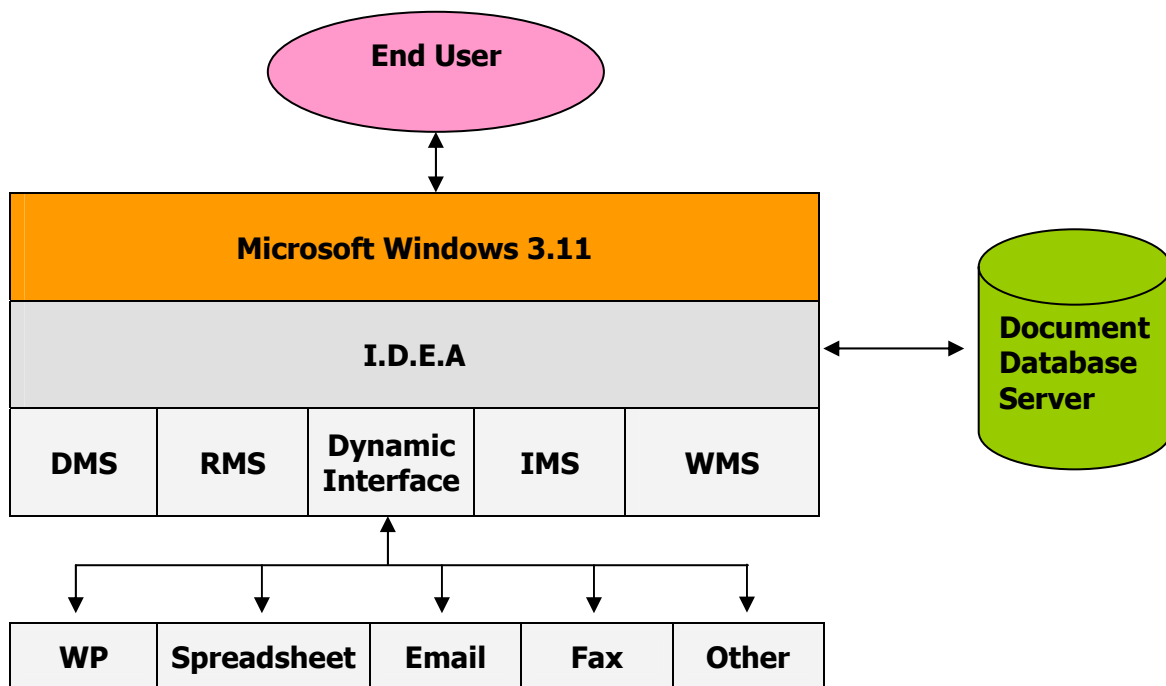
In most organizations, a single document is logged, indexed, copied, processed and generally handled many times by several different applications. Key information from this single document is more often than not captured and stored by several different applications. In the days before computers, this same duplication process occurred with each document being copied multiple times and filed in multiple cabinets. As well as being a significant waste of time and resources, this duplication process is also extremely dangerous and may well lead to poor or wrong business decisions and confusion within the organization.

It therefore makes excellent sense to aim for a situation where we retain only a single electronic copy of any document. We then have the choice of controlling the "sharing" of this document with all of the applications that need to refer to it or, of using a single, integrated application that performs all or most of the functions we require, (RMS, DMS, IMS and WMS). In reality, most organizations will employ a solution that is a compromise or some combination of these two ends of the spectrum.

Most of the involved software vendors, to their credit, are attempting to extend their offerings such that they offer a complete "front-end" product. That is, a single system that either interfaces to or includes all of the document management functionality we require. Thus producers of RMS are adding workflow, document and image management functionality to their packages. Producers of DMS are adding records, image and workflow management functionality to their packages and so on.

Standard interface, seamlessly integrated, enterprise-wide document management systems are on the horizon. These "It Does Everything Applications" (IDEA) will feature in the IT plans of most medium to large organizations and government departments within six to twelve months.

The whole idea being that the end-user has a single interface or application, (the IDEA), to learn and work with. This IDEA "knows about" paper and electronic documents, images and workflow processes. A search on any topic will identify all of the documents plus all of the people and work processes involved. It will also tell us the location of the electronic and physical documents and will report on the degree of completion or otherwise of any due work processes. It will also tell us who is late or overdue and allow us to "prod" them into action.

This IDEA also has dynamic links to the other application processing systems such as WinWord, WordPerfect, Lotus, Excel, etc. Let's say that the initial result of our search was a statement that there were 5 documents that met our search criteria, 3 were in Excel format and 2 were in WinWord format. Our IDEA would have a summary of each, keywords, author details, a précis etc. If we needed more information than was in the précis, we could ask our IDEA to "start" or "launch" the relevant package, such as Excel, and display the complete document in its native format. This is an important point. These new developments are not trying to duplicate the functionality of the accepted application systems such as WinWord, Mail and WordPerfect, rather they attempt to have a seamless (i.e., without effort or work on your part) dynamic interface such that the user can move

back and forth between the IDEA and the chosen application, (e.g., WinWord), with a single keystroke or mouse click.

Like all modem software developments there will be varying levels of difficulty in installing an IDEA. Running an IDEA on a single PC will be relatively straightforward. A 64 PC network will be more complex and an enterprise wide installation, involving multiple networks and server operating systems, (e.g., NTAS, Novell and Unix), will be the most complex and costly implementation.

Many years ago, the mainframe EDP managers of the day lamented and resisted the spread of PCs throughout the organization because they weren't under their control. In reality, the spread of PCs was inevitable because the end-users had suffered at the bottom of the EDP backlog for far too long. PCs gave the long-suffering end-user a chance to do his own thing, to produce something he needed, when he needed it - anathema to the traditional EDP manager. The advent of networks brought the PCs back under the control of the IT department, albeit with an additional management workload and a new-age responsibility to ensure that it provided the services the users wanted rather than what the IT department thought they wanted.

The advent of a standard interface, seamlessly integrated, enterprise-wide document management systems mandates that all PCs must be under the control of the IT department but also imposes a significantly higher requirement for effective management and technical proficiency. **The cost of preparing for and then installing this type of software will always exceed the actual cost of the software.** To underestimate the installation cost is to court disaster. It is imperative that the business and operational needs of the users be studied and documented prior to any attempted installation. This is not a task that can be conceived and managed from within the IT bunker. The end-users absolutely have to be involved in each and every process.

However, given the apparent inability of IT management to learn from past mistakes and given their unfettered infatuation with new technology, it is inevitable that the advantages of a IDEA will be oversold, the necessary planning ignored and the impact underestimated as the technical gurus steamroll "Make-My-Reputation" (MMR) projects through naive organizations. It appears that we in the IT industry simply have to make a few monumental mistakes before we can benefit from new technology. Try to make sure that it is not your organization that pays the price.

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