



Rolling out a pain free, low cost records and document management solution

How?

Quote:

Albert Einstein

"To keep doing the same thing and to expect the results to be different is the definition of insanity."

Introduction

I have been heavily involved in records management rollouts since 1984 (when we released the first DocFind) and in document management rollouts since the early 90s (working with the first pioneering DM systems like SoftSolutions from Novell).

I have been designing, building, installing, consulting on and supporting records and document management solutions (now called EDRMS or Content Management Systems) for twenty-five years.

I have seen many more (expensive) failures than I have seen successes and I have seen most pilots end up with just a small part of the population actually using the system.

My experience is extensive, hands on and covers a wide spectrum of industries and locations around the world. The 'failure' problem is common regardless of location, language or industry. Some things I have noted over these same 25 years:

- Most organizations spend a fortune up front and then very little afterwards such that even the most ambitious projects slowly degrade year after year.
- No one ever correctly calculates the true total cost of ownership of EDRMS projects; they usually underestimate by a massive amount.
- Most projects are based on the client-centric model requiring each and every employee to become an 'expert' and to behave in a totally consistent and standard manner when selecting and classifying information. Each employee is also presumed to be totally enthusiastic and supportive.

This last point above (everyone is an expert and everyone is totally supportive) is consistent with every failed project because the two assumptions are patently fatuous and non achievable. They are in fact the root cause of failure because they assume a foundation that cannot ever exist. What is the chance that one hundred employees across an organization will classify a record in exactly the same way? How about one thousand or ten thousand employees? There is no chance.

The client-centric model for records and document management where the end-user is the expert and does all the work and is always properly trained (year after year) and is 100% consistent and professional and enthusiastic and supportive and diligent and honest has never worked and will never work.

Yet, as an industry we ignore history (another quote - "*He who ignores history is bound to repeat it*") and perpetuate this failed paradigm; why?

Why do we throw good money after bad? Why do we begin hugely expensive, long duration projects we know will fail? Why do we sign ourselves up for this level of pain?

The most important lesson to learn is that failure isn't the problem; failure is a symptom of a flawed model; the inevitable result. The real problem is expecting the client-centric model to work (despite at least 20 years of evidence to the contrary) and then basing all of our plans (and throwing all of our money) on this flawed model.

Strategy

Most rollouts are based on the time-not-honoured client-centric model. This is a high cost, high-risk, long duration and very, very flawed model. It won't work. It has a slim chance of working in a small organization; it has a snowball's chance in hell of working in a large, complex, layered, constantly changing and politically driven (read dynamic) organization like any large government agency or multinational company. Why not?

- People don't like to be told what to do.
- People don't like to be given extra work and responsibilities.
- New 'productivity' technology is not supposed to increase everyone's workload. Combining the terms 'electronic document management system' and 'productivity gains' in the one sentence creates an oxymoron almost as good as the infamous 'military intelligence'.
- People just want things to 'happen' as if by magic; they want the benefits without the commitment and workload.

- People will agree that the rollout of an EDRMS is a good thing but secretly they assume someone else will do all the work.
- People know that when you say you will continue to invest in ongoing training and support that you won't because you never have.
- You can train people multiple times but if they aren't interested, it doesn't stick and you have wasted your money (most training is a waste of time and money for this same reason – lack of interest and motivation or 'training-for-training's-sake').
- People aren't manageable clones; they have different personalities, IQs, objectives, morality, etc, etc. There is no one-size-fits-all records and document management end-user. Yet, the client-centric model assumes there is; it assumes an army of docile clones all doing the work required in an identical and uniform way.
- People know that if they ignore your instructions long enough you will eventually stop giving them.
- People have a way of subverting unpopular processes to the point where they become irrelevant and just disappear.
- The client-centric model ignores human nature; that's why it always fails.

The Auditor General identified a key problem in the Australian Federal Government's EDRMS programs some years ago – none of the federal agencies met their objectives and a major problem identified was the lack of funding for ongoing training and support. The plan did not allow for or budget for retraining every time a new release came out, every time a new employee was hired, etc.

In real life, ongoing training just does not happen (too expensive, too difficult to manage and schedule and too disruptive to normal work) but an ongoing program of training is one of the key fundamental assumptions of the client-centric model and an absolute necessity if you believe the proponents of this model. If success relies on a heavy training/retraining regime and you don't do it then why do you expect success?

The more we look objectively at the client-centric model the more we have to accept its colossal failings. Yet we persist with it; why?

How does the fully-automatic, rules-driven and server-centric model actually work?

Well first all of all what does it actually mean?

Fully-automatic

This means everything happens as a background process and the long suffering end-user does not have to be involved in the selection, capture and classification of records. It is fully-automatic from the point of view of the end-user.

Rules-Driven

The whole process is driven by a highly intelligent and flexible rules-engine that allows each organization to meet its needs exactly. The rules-engine has to allow you to define a small number of very clever and flexible rules in a way that governs all of the information you create and receive. Too many rules and it becomes too much of a maintenance task and unmanageable. Too little flexibility and you can't address each and every case.

Server-Centric

With the server-centric model all required processing of business rules takes place on your servers (database servers, email servers, shared drives, etc), not on the end-user's desktop (the client). This type of processing is often referred to as 'background' processing. Most importantly, it needs to be dynamically scalable using techniques such as multi-threading and by taking advantage of additional RAM and multiple processors as and when required. The processing needs to be accomplished using a variable number of intelligent and super-fast agents that can be deployed across multiple email servers and file servers and provide scaling through highly flexible and efficient asynchronous processing.

However, a major advantage of the server-centric model is that very little is time critical. With a client-centric model if it takes two minutes to save and index a document the end-user is impacted and unhappy because he/she has to 'wait'. So generally, all client-centric processes are time critical because they affect people's ability to do work.

With the server-centric model the only time critical process is capture. That is, you need to capture an email as soon as it is sent or received (even before the user sees it) and similarly you need to capture any new or updated electronic document instantly. However, the subsequent processes such as indexing and saving or converting to PDF, etc are not time critical because they do not impact on an end-user's ability to do work; they are background processes. The end-user is not waiting.

With the server-centric model it doesn't matter if it takes a minute to index a new version of an electronic document and convert it to a PDF because no one is waiting for it to finish. Similarly, it doesn't matter if processing times extend out during the busiest part of the day because no one is being affected; no one is sitting there waiting for the process to finish.

What does the end-user have to do under this model?

The common end-user has to know how to search and view records and use standard reporting. Some end users will need to be trained to use the workflow and ad hoc reporting. A small number of administrator users will be trained in how to add users, manage security, build and save standard searches, standard reports, manage the audit trail, etc, etc.

The bottom line is that most people will just need to be trained in how to search for information.

Recommendation

Let's not repeat history and let's not perpetuate a bad and failed model.

If you intend to roll out an EDRMS across an organization, especially a large, complex, dynamic and politically driven organization, then you need a new model.

You need to discard the client-centric model where the long suffering end-user is supposed to be the expert and do all the work and instead adopt a fully-automatic, rules-driven, server-centric model where all the analysis, selection, capturing and classification is done 'behind-the-scenes' as a series of asynchronous, fully automatic (and most importantly), fully consistent processes (there is never any consistency in the client-centric model – this is one of its major failings).

The technology and processes already exist to automatically analyse emails, electronic documents (and automatically version them), faxes and even paper and to make all the decisions necessary to determine what should be a record, how it should be captured, how it should be classified and even to automatically determine what workflow (business processes) should be triggered, if any.

The most work is still in handling incoming paper because it requires handling and scanning and human interaction. We all know we should work towards a totally electronic model but until that happens we have to address paper. However, scanning paper to produce digital documents and forms and then initiating workflow is something the industry is actually very good at. A lot of our customers all around the world still struggle with document management but all of them are comfortable with imaging. One of our partners, Fuji Xerox, specializes in converting huge volumes of paper to digital images and in fully automating all business processes associated with those same images. They also do this for huge organizations on a huge scale so it is eminently doable. It is proven and it works.

So fortunately, the one part of the equation that requires human intervention (handling paper) is actually one where we have a good track record and an enormous amount of expertise as an industry.

When compared to the client-centric model, the fully-automatic, rules-driven, server-centric model is easier and faster to roll out, requires massively less training, is totally consistent in its application and is controllable and scalable. Because it is rules-driven you can change the way you handle any object or modify your compliance regime or modify your Metadata or retention standards almost instantly and have them apply instantly across the whole organization.

You don't have to roll out new client software, you don't have to produce volumes of new standards and procedures, you don't have to stage changes over years because of the need to re-educate and train all users. You simply make a change and then it is automatically perpetuated right across the organization.

The benefits and advantages of the fully-automatic, rules-driven, server-centric model are manifold and yet we continue to ignore it. Why?

In my experience the main opposition to the new model comes from the traditional records managers. There seems to be some ingrained rule or practice that end-users **MUST** be RM experts and **MUST** do the work. In some cases there is even insistence that all emails must be printed out and filed.

I have had records manager after records manager tell me (without reason or explanation) that they will never consider a fully-automatic, rules-driven, server-centric solution and that the only solution they will ever consider is the client-centric one where the end-user **has to** do all the work. They don't want to discuss the failures or the costs or the extraordinarily long rollout time frames or the totally inconsistent results. This is a serious cultural issue that you and your project team will face time and time again when trying to change the paradigm.

Technology is not the issue, culture and ingrained practice are the issues you will face in your endeavours to solve all records and document management issues in your organization. Moving forward with a new 'fully-automatic, rules-driven, server-centric' model won't solve all cultural issues but it will solve at least ninety-percent of them.

Related Papers

I have been writing about and discussing and presenting on this topic for many years. The following are just a few of my previous papers that mention issues discussed above.

<http://www.knowledgeonecorp.com/news/pdfs/Do%20you%20really%20need%20a%20Taxonomy%20V2.pdf>

<http://www.knowledgeonecorp.com/news/pdfs/The%20Shared%20Drives%20Problem.pdf>

<http://www.knowledgeonecorp.com/news/pdfs/What%20Happened%20to%20the%20Knowledge%20Mgmt%20Revolution.pdf>

<http://www.knowledgeonecorp.com/news/pdfs/Why%20Organizations%20Dont%20Manage%20Emails%20Effectively.pdf>

<http://www.knowledgeonecorp.com/news/pdfs/Implementing%20Electronic%20Document%20Management.pdf>

<http://www.knowledgeonecorp.com/news/pdfs/Emails.%20GroupWise%20&%20Records%20Retention.pdf>

<http://www.knowledgeonecorp.com/news/pdfs/Knowledge%20Management%20-%20The%20Next%20Challenge.pdf>

<http://www.knowledgeonecorp.com/news/pdfs/Information%20&%20Records%20Management%20Towards%202000.pdf>

And yes, we do run our business under the fully-automatic, rules-driven, server-centric model and have done for many years; we practice what we preach.

Frank McKenna

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