

Where Are Your Records?

Have you ever stopped and thought about where all the content in your organization resides? Go ahead, we'll wait...

Kind of scary to think about how many different content sources there are in your organization, isn't it? Now, how much of that content is considered a record and under records management control? If you are not sure what a record is, check out this definition from [ARMA](#):

"...a record is any recorded information, regardless of medium or characteristics, made or received by an organization that is evidence of its operations, and has value requiring its retention for a specific period of time."

In this post we'll take a look at the challenge of records management in an organization, large or small. We will look at where content resides, how to address records management and what the best approach is to achieve success in the long term.

The Where and How

For most organizations, it doesn't take long to come up with a larger than expected list of where records may reside. Even if your company has 'standardized' an enterprise content management solution, it's doubtful all your records reside there. Through mergers or over time, you may have acquired multiple content management, imaging, records management or collaboration tools. Or a department may have implemented a system for a specific purpose or project (construction management for example). Plus, there are always network file shares where content collects over time.

Enterprise Content Management (ECM) has been around since the 90's and many organizations have one or more ECM platforms in place. Legacy ECM solutions like Documentum or FileNet are often tightly integrated into a few, key business processes. The content on network file shares has built up over a period of years and can be terabytes in size. In a lot of cases the people who added the content to the file shares have long ago left the company, taking the knowledge of their cryptic folder/file naming system with them. Older versions of SharePoint may be out there and contain large amounts of content, also poorly organized and managed. Ever heard the term "SharePoint site sprawl"? Again, the original content owners are long gone, so no one knows what's in the sites or how valuable it is.

And then there's the paper records, boxes and boxes of paper records. File rooms and warehouses filled with boxes of paper records. All managed and tracked in an Access database, an Excel spreadsheet or a stand-alone physical records system.

Addressing the Problem

How do we deal with this problem of content everywhere? And how do we get consistent records management policies applied? Why don't we just move everything into one central repository and manage it there. This has been the approach of many records management vendors over the years. However, migrations can be difficult, time consuming and costly. Plus you then have the challenge of change management, users have to be trained on using a new system.

Retiring a legacy ECM solution can be challenging. Decoupling these solutions from the business process can be complex and takes a lot of planning. Sometimes these systems are managing regulated content or are validated systems and require extra care and handling. Mapping object types and security models to more modern repositories can be a challenge.

File shares are usually one of the main targets for migration. But when you have terabytes of content, you can't simply dump it all into SharePoint Online and be done. It won't be managed any more effectively there. Content analytics must be performed, ROT (redundant, obsolete, trivial) content must be removed, and high value content identified. Again, properties and security need to be mapped to the new storage location. Then, you can put a plan in place on how and when content will be migrated. It can take weeks or months to do all of this and it costs money, in terms of software and services. It's often more cost effective to only move the high value content to the preferred repository.

Legacy SharePoint environments share many of the challenges of file share migrations, mainly because early SharePoint implementations were treated like glorified file systems. Content was just dumped into SharePoint sites and libraries with minimal planning. Cleaning out the ROT and identifying the high value content takes time and effort and comes at a cost.

With paper records, the obvious answer for most clients is to scan everything into one central repository. It's electronic, it gets [OCR'd](#), is searchable and it's online. Problem solved! But if you have tens or hundreds of thousands of boxes, this isn't a simple problem to solve. Like everything else, it takes time and money, lots of it. Do you outsource it, or try to do it in house? If you do it in house, do you have the personnel, skill and equipment? If you outsource, what's the cost per page or box going to be? Often doing a go-forward or on-demand approach is more effective for organizations.

Implementing Records Management

With all the challenges we've mentioned, and since we don't have unlimited budgets to do everything at once, how do you effectively implement a records management program? Over the years, many organizations have tried to implement a centralized approach to records management, one system to control and manage all records. These have had a low success rate for exactly the reasons we outlined above:

- Change management was a major issue
- The systems are hard to use and disruptive to end users
- Users lose access to content in the new records management system
- Migrating all the content to a single system is next to impossible
- Users were forced to understand and apply records management policies to content
- Physical records were often left out of the solution
- Records managers were required to have a working knowledge of the ECM system administration to implement records management

These reasons are why you should take a federated approach to records management. Records management policy, retention and disposition are managed in a central, web-based records management solution. The system is designed with the Records Manager in mind and removes them from the administration of the ECM solution.

The content remains **in-place**, never being moved out of its source repository. Content in SharePoint Online stays there. Content on the file share stays there. Paper records in boxes and warehouses stay there. Users work with the content systems in the course of their day to day activities. Records management policies, centrally defined and implemented by your records management team, are automatically applied to content as it's created or edited. It becomes a seamless, manageable process. It's invisible to your end users and can be centrally managed by your records management team. They no longer have to be ECM experts. Everyone focuses on what they do best.

If you are undertaking a planned, phased content migration (as most companies do) low value content can be managed in place. High value content can be managed in place until it's migrated or digitized. Then it's reclassified and managed in its new location. This all happens automatically based on the records management policies centrally defined by your team.

Want to know more? Contact us.