

Effective records management policy

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There are many reasons why organisations decide to define and implement a records management policy, but these are often external factors, such as changes in legislation or requests or demands from 3rd parties. If taken in isolation these external factors create a negative approach that obscures the internal needs to reduce costs or risks and to add value to the organisation.

While these external drivers are important, and in some cases, such as legal directives, impossible to avoid, they often disguise something more fundamental that will ultimately shape whether the whole approach is effective or not - the overall attitude of the organisation. This will shape the basic tenants of the policy, define the implementation path, and decide whether it will be readily accepted by all stakeholders involved.

So why is attitude so important?

The initial message that triggered the need to review or construct a records management policy will undoubtedly have come with negative connotations – ‘we need to do this or else...’, and this immediately places all those involved in the wrong frame of mind. It might seem a little glib, and overly influenced by sales or marketing hype, but taking a positive attitude can pay dividends.

Firstly defining policy is an opportunity not simply to ‘comply’ with externally mandated practices, but to implement best practice. It is an opportunity to learn from others and improve the organisation for the benefits of all involved from the value for shareholders to daily toil of individual employees.

With this in mind, while those external needs which triggered the process need to be born in mind, the focus and emphasis should be on where the policy can and should deliver benefits, rather than what limitations or obstructions it will impose. This means getting early and individual grass roots involvement of the broadest set of participants to identify the best path and positive impacts.

Both organisation and individuals are looking for measures to keep costs in check, manage personal and corporate risk, and wherever possible create positive benefits. These can be identified from a personal as well as organisation perspective to help ensure adoption, and should include how a records management policy:

- helps individuals to do their jobs more easily and efficiently because they can find the information they need, when they need it – cost reduction, increased productivity, employee satisfaction
- protects the individual and the organisation by providing objective guidelines and procedures – risk reduction
- ensures the organisation does not keep more records than necessary, and everyone understands what can be deleted and when – reducing physical space storage and personnel time costs
- gives individuals records they can rely on, increasing their confidence and a feeling of professionalism, ultimately supporting pride in their contribution. – adding value for employees but also the 3rd parties they deal with.

What constitutes a good policy? Several things need to be set out as clearly as possible to define the scope and characteristics of the procedures that will support effective records management.

- Accountability – what are the roles and responsibilities from internal or administrative and external or legal perspectives.
- Collaboration – what are the rules controlling workflow, information flow and access.
- Quality – how will the accuracy, integrity and dependencies such as timeliness be maintained.

- Security – what are the threats and risks and how will they be countered.
- Information mobility – where and how will data be used outside the organisational premises and how will this be controlled.
- Measurement – identify criteria to aid future resource planning, and test policy delivers against both the external accountability and internal needs.

Even when many parties have had their say and an effective project manager has delivered a complete, well thought out policy document, the real work is only just beginning. An effective policy has to be an active living entity rather than a static, unread weighty tome.

This life beyond its initial inception means it has to be well communicated so that everyone understands their role and responsibility. Involving all the right people in the early stages, and emphasising the positive aspects of how the policy is supportive rather than the negatives plays an important part.

Even then, refinement will be necessary, to ensure that the policy continues to support internal goals as they evolve, and the external requirements as they are no doubt subject to change and review as governments and external bodies define new best practices.

None of these changes should be viewed as a threat, but in the positive light of an opportunity to refine and improve the policy for the benefit of both organisation and individual.

The right attitude from the outset aids communication, adherence and support of any business policy or strategy. Early involvement ensures concerns can be dealt with up front, and as many benefits as possible can be identified and applied.

A policy that feels like it has been imposed will generate resistance, but one where everyone can see and understand personal benefits will stimulate more positive attitudes and make compliance with the original driving external factors far easier to achieve.

There are many resources available, especially online and through organisations such as AIIM, for guidance on developing a records management policy, and there is also of course, support from internationally recognised industry standards, such as ISO15489.

But as many of the external controls have geographic relevance or local legislation, even in the internet connected age, in the final analysis, some things need to be assessed locally, and discussions with peer groups can be very informative.

Over the coming months we will explore the major aspects of good records management practice that should fit within the framework of an effective record management policy.

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Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation’s environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca’s mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

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