

DMReview – The Four Ps of ILM

By Clive Longbottom, Service Director, Quocirca Ltd

Businesses survive or die based on decisions made on information available to them, and yet the majority of organizations have little control over the growing mountains of information that they create on a daily basis. On top of the formal data being created by database-centric applications, such as enterprise resource planning (ERP) and customer relationship management (CRM) applications, more and more of an organization's intellectual property is being created as ad hoc information held in documents created by individuals in Microsoft Office or other mainstream desktop applications.

To make matters worse, there are the increasing pressures of governance and audit, where the ability to show exactly how a process happened, what the outcomes were and to be able to demonstrate that such information is being kept according to the various legal and other compliance requirements placed upon us is becoming more important. Historically, organizations have looked to discrete but interlinked solutions, mainly underpinned by enterprise content management (ECM). However, ECM systems are generally aimed only at managing information that has already gone through several stages of a document's creation process and has already been agreed to have considerable business value held within it. On top of the ECM system lie all the business intelligence and reporting systems, along with all the main tools aimed at audit and governance.

To the rescue comes information lifecycle management (ILM), the means to managing all the information utilized within an organization. Or not, as the majority of ILM systems miss the point completely. Many systems don't deal with the complete, end-to-end lifecycle of the document – an obvious problem considering the name vendors have given to the solution itself. If concentration is only on controlling the aging, archival and disposal of information that has already reached a certain level of importance within an organization, the point has been missed. This approach misses out on the wealth of hidden information held by individuals and small groups that has not reached the more formal storage environments. Information that is still being worked upon, either as the sole

ownership of an individual or by a group of people as a collaborative, peer review environment. This information may hold the key to whether a decision is a yes or a no, and yet it rarely gets to be seen by the decision-maker due to the lack of tooling available.

However, trying to comprehensively control all information from first thought to end of life would require far too much tooling, storage that would grow out of control and require more technical skills than are currently available in the market. So how can an organization approach the issue of enterprise ILM?

First, the problem needs to be cut down into chunks. For this, take a four-step approach. Starting from the personal environment where an individual begins work on an idea, moving to Peer, where a group of individuals work together to critique and refine an idea, then onto to Published, where the output is made more widely available within an organization, and finally to Public, where the output is made available to the widest group of all. Each stage has its own issues that need to be addressed, and yet each stage needs to be able to interact successfully with the others.

The Personal Stage

Within an organization, much of the information held is of little consequence. Emails between employees are more often personal or about issues that have little or no importance to the business rather than anything strategic or covering areas of intellectual property. Many documents started by individuals get no further than an outline, as the writer realizes that the content is not important enough or as he finds other information that contradicts the original idea. However, the first sparks of intellectual property will be coming from the individual – and we need to ensure that the information is managed correctly.

Let's take as a starting point the creation of a document such as this article you are now reading. To begin with, I sat down and created a basic outline with headings and bullet points to set out the flow and the general ideas behind the

piece. I worked on other reports for a while and came back to this article and began to flesh it out, using other information sources, such as the Web and internal formal data sources, looking at research already carried out in the markets around usage of document management solutions. Back to other reports again, and then back to this, where I reread what I had created, added bits, deleted others and changed large parts of it. And so on, until I had something that I, personally, was reasonably happy with.

If this had been under the control of a document management system, I would probably have had around 12 versions of the document already – and the first 11 would have had minimum value to the business. However, there have been times where I have changed a document to the point where I have wanted to go back to a previous version. Many Office packages offer a basic versioning system, where a defined number of previous versions are automatically kept, with a low overhead on storage. Within the personal environment, this will generally provide enough functionality for information control.

However, even with me now being happy with the output does not preclude the possibility that what I have created is not correct, misses out on key areas that should have been covered or is missing key information that others have access to. To move such a personal document to a position where it has real potential value to an organization, I need to ensure that a more collaborative environment is utilized to refine the content and check the validity of the content – and for this we need to move to the peer stage.

The Peer Stage

Once a document has been created that an individual is happy with, it needs to be validated. This is generally carried out by using a peer review group. In many cases, this is carried out through the use of group emails, with the initiator having to pull all the comments together at the end as they feel that all likely comments have been received. Once the initiator has dealt with all comments, the new document then has to be sent out again for further commenting, iterating until the level of commenting is felt to be of little intrinsic value.

To get around this problem, many larger organizations have utilized discussion threads, such as provided by Lotus Notes, enabling the

peer group to see each other's comments and react against them. However, discussions can rapidly move off the topic, and heavy mediation by the initiator is required to keep everything focused. Other more formal companies will use workflow systems, passing the document through a defined process for validation and comment. A newer approach is to use a team wiki, with the document being built up collaboratively in situ, with full audit capabilities showing where changes have been made and by whom.

I do not recommend email as a means of managing such a review process: it can become cumbersome, and as people do not necessarily get to read other's comments, a full picture is difficult to build up. Workflow can be useful, but only where the review process is highly formalized and each reviewer knows their part in the process. Far better to utilize a discussion thread system or a team wiki, ensuring that a fully collaborative peer environment is created.

Once we have a fully reviewed, validated and generally agreed-upon document, we now have to move it to an area where the maximum value can be gained from it – and for this, we need to publish the document to a greater readership.

The Published Stage

Once a document has moved through peer review, it is ready to be published for a larger audience. The main error that many organizations make at this point is in believing that the document is now at a steady state – that can be left where it is once published. However, the markets change and information needs updating. This leads to the need for basic changes to many documents. Everyone who needs the information held within the document now has to ensure that they are utilizing the latest version. This is where we need solid document management, with full check-in and check-out capabilities, full versioning, publish and subscribe and so on.

At this stage, legal compliance and corporate governance also become major issues. The life of information has to be fully understood, whether due to the requirements of a legal requirement such as Sox or HIPAA, or whether for a corporate best practice such as ISO 9000 or Six Sigma.

Information also needs to be aged according to the many different aspects of policy and procedure – for example, although a legal requirement may state that a document needs to be kept for a long period of time, it may make sense for the organization to age the document onto lower-cost storage after a period of time, or even onto offline storage. Such storage considerations are a major aspect of ILM – ensuring that the value within a document is reflected in the way the document can be recovered.

But, the process doesn't stop here – many documents need to be made available to a greater audience still, to suppliers and customers, or to the general public at large.

The Public Stage

The final stage of a document may well be when the document is placed into a fully or partially public environment, either via a public Web site or a shared intranet site. The scenario here is very similar to the published stage – documents need to be heavily controlled, ensuring that readers only get to see the latest version of a document and that aging of information is managed carefully.

At each stage of the process, information must be able to be pulled back from one level to another. For example, if external data shows that a public document is now wrong, the document needs to be pulled all the way back to an individual for rewriting and then promoted back through each stage to being public again.

Likewise, should peer review show the need for heavy rework, the individual will need to bring the document back into their personal area for such rework to be carried out before going back to the review stage again.

There are other aspects that have to be considered with ILM, such as how to deal with external information, scanned documents and the use of metadata – but these need more discussion beyond this article.

ILM is not about managing subsets of corporate information for the few – it is about managing corporate intellectual property to maximize its value to the business. A fully connected approach is required – and the four Ps of ILM can help you meet these needs.

About Quocirca

Quocirca is a primary research and analysis company specialising in the business impact of information technology and communications (ITC). With world-wide, native language reach, Quocirca provides in-depth insights into the views of buyers and influencers in large, mid-sized and small organisations. Its analyst team is made up of real-world practitioners with first hand experience of ITC delivery who continuously research and track the industry and its real usage in the markets.

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.

Quocirca has a pro-active primary research programme, regularly surveying users, purchasers and resellers of ITC products and services on emerging, evolving and maturing technologies. Over time, Quocirca has built a picture of long term investment trends, providing invaluable information for the whole of the ITC community.

Quocirca works with global and local providers of ITC products and services to help them deliver on the promise that ITC holds for business. Quocirca's clients include Oracle, Microsoft, IBM, Dell, T-Mobile, Vodafone, EMC, Symantec and Cisco, along with other large and medium sized vendors, service providers and more specialist firms.

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