



## THE ONGOING DEBATE: PAPER VS. ELECTRONIC RECORDS

More than 20 years ago, businesses began anticipating a paperless workplace. Today, RIM professionals continue to integrate the latest electronic storage solutions into their business plans hoping to achieve a 'paper-free' environment, but is the elimination of paper records realistic?



A 2003 University of California Berkeley School of Information Management and Systems study estimates the amount of new information stored on paper increased 36 percent between 1999 and 2002. This increase stems largely from the rate at which computer generated data is produced. As RIM professionals deal with increasingly larger volumes of paper and electronic records, keeping up with storage trends is imperative.

Determining whether paper or electronic records, or both, suit a company's business needs from a workflow perspective, as well as an operations perspective, is key to developing a well designed RIM program.

### Electronic versus paper

ARMA International estimates more than 90 percent of records created today are electronic — which includes formats from digital media, such as DVDs and CDs, to scanned documents and e-mail correspondence — and emerging technologies continue to have an impact.

Electronic records have assisted in the speed of communication, as data is shared in a compressed and downloadable format eliminating the need for slower moving faxes or postal services. Electronic records also provide cost and space savings as they can be stored by the thousands in the same space needed to store a handful of paper files.

While the benefits are significant, electronic media can change at an alarming rate resulting in incompatible software or obsolete hardware. If a storage system is outdated, electronic records can be compromised. Similarly, individuals unfamiliar with the software may have difficulty obtaining electronic records. Also, transferring to electronic formats can be costly requiring multiple file conversions, document scanning, electronic indexing, purchasing software and hardware, overall storage system maintenance and additional staff training.



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# Implementing and managing a paper-based RECORDS MANAGEMENT PROGRAM



## SYSTEC SOLUTIONS:

### Developing a paper records management program

Whether you are creating a paper-based records and information management (RIM) program or enhancing existing processes, let SYSTEC recommend a comprehensive strategy to create a functional and compliant RIM program. SYSTEC provides the products and services you need, including filing accessories, labeling systems, custom folders and storage equipment, to keep paper records organized, accessible and compliant. From planning and implementation to follow-up, SYSTEC is your single source for records management solutions.



Paper-based information management and storage is engrained in corporate culture despite emerging technologies designed to eliminate the need for paper. In fact, technology is actually contributing to the burgeoning paper problem. Hewlett-Packard estimates laser printers in America alone are churning out 1.2 trillion pages annually. To successfully handle this continued growth of paper-based records, RIM professionals must properly implement and maintain an effective and compliant records management program, which includes a functional filing system approach.

#### Choosing a filing system approach

A well designed filing system provides accessibility to information as well as record accuracy - allowing you to consistently meet company and compliance guidelines. To determine the best filing system, evaluate your record management requirements including the size of your record inventory and how your records are categorized or utilized.

There are three common approaches to organizing a filing system. An Alphabetic approach, which is arranged according to

a person, product, company name or any other identifier that can be alphabetized, is ideal for smaller, non-automated filing systems. A Straight Numeric approach, which is the organization of files according to a number or a combination of numbers, is more common for systems of 10,000 files or less, files that are more easily numbered than named and pre-numbered files such as invoices or case files. There is also the Terminal Digit Numeric system incorporating an assigned numeric approach that provides equal distribution of files throughout a system, eliminating file crowding and space underutilization.

#### Selecting a file folder

Folders are the foundation of a filing system. They provide housing, support, protection and identity for documents. When determining a folder choice, take into consideration the following:

- The quantity of information within the folder will determine whether expandable or pocket files will be more effective
- How records are organized within a folder may require sub-dividers or guides to separate records
- The frequency of folder use is a good indicator of the durability your file folder will need
- How the folder will be stored will determine whether color-coded, top-tabbed, side-tabbed or hanging files will be more appropriate

#### Label system design

Effectively labeled files increase filing accuracy and accessibility. There are two types of file label approaches to consider: sticky label and strip label.

# Considerations for developing an electronic records management program

As technology and records management merge in the workplace, companies are eager to transfer paper records to electronic formats to free up space and streamline workflow. With a myriad of formats emerging, it's important to understand the challenges of electronic records management and the best solutions to create an effective information management program.

## Electronic record challenges

Technology advances rapidly. Whether archiving records or implementing an electronic document management system, software versions are increasingly updated and computer hardware is continually upgraded to enhance capacity and speed. These advancements impact the compatibility, accessibility and functionality of some electronic information management systems.

As cited in the May/June 2003 issue of *The Information Management Journal*, a University of Southern California neurobiologist was unable to obtain information off of magnetic tapes from NASA's 1976 Viking landing on Mars. Current technology could not read the format making the electronic data inaccessible. As a result, paper printouts had to be located and students had to re-type data, delaying the project. Installing the appropriate system in

advance will help you avoid compatibility issues as technologies change, keeping your electronic information management program running efficiently.

Another consideration when developing an electronic information management program is training and implementation. Determine who will manage the system and access records. Untrained individuals may jeopardize how records are obtained or manipulated, ultimately impacting the existence and authenticity of company information. Properly train users to ensure system accuracy and functionality.

If transferring paper records to electronic formats, be aware of the time and cost associated with the conversion. Hardware and software programs need to be purchased, paper records need to be evaluated to determine what will be transferred, files need to be converted or scanned, as well as managed and maintained. You may want to consider outsourcing your conversion project. While electronic records are a viable and efficient solution, prepare yourself for issues that may arise and look to someone who provides the best solutions for your records management needs, while keeping in mind up-front savings and long-term cost efficiencies. ■



The sticky label approach, which incorporates sheets of individual color bars adhered to a folder in a specified order, creates a simple system and can be managed by anyone with minimal training. The strip label approach, which provides a more automated, efficient solution, preprints color bars onto an 8-inch label which is applied to a folder creating the appearance of color bars on the folder tab. These labels typically require less labor to apply and are designed on a software system that determines the format and color band order.

Other factors impacting label design include the identifying information on each label. Determine if you need a company identifier, such as a logo, or other information like a social security or case number. If you plan on incorporating a tracking system, a bar code should be placed on each label. Other more specific considerations include font style, size and label colors.

## Room layout

The availability of functional space is an issue plaguing many businesses. Overcrowded shelf storage or decentralized filing cabinets often result in inefficient space utilization and lost or misfiled records. As you analyze your record storage needs, evaluate active file areas, archived file locations and floor plans to help determine a plan to maximize ease of file access, location convenience for staff, as well as space efficiency. Doing your homework will put you well on your way to choosing a functional, efficient storage solution.

These are just a few factors to consider as you develop your paper-based records management program. A well planned and structured filing system ensures record accessibility, accuracy and regulatory compliance. ■

### Paper versus electronic

While electronic formats are the emerging trend, paper-based information is still widely used and often considered the legal copy of record. Paper records have been known to maintain their integrity for centuries and some can contain important handwritten information that may be critical from a legal and compliance perspective, which could potentially be lost or accidentally eliminated during conversion to electronic formats. In addition, paper records have long provided individuals the convenience of use including the ability to easily view, share or copy documents for review and ultimately track progress in a tangible format. However, unlike electronic records, storing paper can be costly and overwhelming to administer unless properly managed with an efficient records management system. Paper systems can also be easily lost or misfiled unless an automated tracking system is implemented to identify record locations.

### The compromise

As companies evaluate the utilization of paper and electronic record formats, they are finding that the benefits and challenges of each make a dual format system the most appropriate approach to efficient information management. With the development of these dual systems, organizations have to overcome new obstacles to remain in compliance and must follow compliance-related procedures that impact the storage, maintenance, retention and destruction of both formats. For example, multiple storage systems and technology tools may be required to manage both paper and electronic records. In the event of an audit, the appropriate records necessary to meet regulatory standards must be accessible and accurate. Record duplication is also more possible, which can be detrimental in meeting compliance guidelines, resulting in the need for tighter system maintenance and control.

As dual systems develop, organizations face new challenges to remain compliant and follow procedures that impact the storage, maintenance, retention and destruction of both formats.

### Looking to the future

What is the future of records in the workplace? Seventy five percent of all information is still maintained on paper, which suggests people are finding it difficult to transition to electronic records entirely. Yet an overwhelming majority of records today are created and stored electronically. The simple fact is that as technologies change and compliance guidelines emerge, RIM professionals are faced with the challenge of putting in place a solid plan that is fitting for both paper and electronic records management. ■

Ask the  
**EXPERT**



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**Q:** My company records are primarily paper-based. What guidelines should I follow to retain my records?

**A:** Retention guidelines vary within organizations and are impacted by internal needs, as well as industry and compliance regulations. To implement an effective retention plan, analyze your needs and determine what constitutes a vital record. Identify legally significant documents as well as records impacting operations. Understanding the lifecycle of your records will help determine the length of retention. Most importantly, remember to follow industry-specific compliance guidelines. Remaining compliant will protect your business in case of legal action. A strong retention plan will make documents more accessible and internal processes run more smoothly. And remember, while your current records are primarily paper, prepare for the retention of important electronic documents such as e-mail. ■



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