

Measuring the Benefit of Records Management

The problem

There are many reasons why institutions do, or should, invest resources in improving the way in which they manage their records and other sources of important internal information. Over the past decade or so the majority of these have focused around 'intangible' benefits which may be critically important but are, by definition, difficult – if not impossible – to measure. New legislation such as the Data Protection Act (1998) and the Freedom of Information Act (2000) have brought legal compliance arguments to the fore, whilst high profile corporate scandals such as the collapse of Enron and disastrous losses of personal data by a number of government departments have focused attention on the role that records management can play in ensuring standards of governance and corporate accountability and reducing risk. These trends have led many records managers to assume that the case for records management is beyond question and need not be subject to the kind of close economic scrutiny that most other proposals presented to management would expect to be.

At the same time, many of the arguments put forward in favour of investing in projects aimed at improving the management of records within institutions often claim that they will result in:

- reduced storage costs (both paper and electronic);
- reduced time spent looking for information;
- increased productivity; and
- greater reuse of information resulting in demonstrable organisational benefits.

Worryingly, however, there appears to be little, if any, evidence to support these claims. This is not, of course, to suggest that such benefits will not be realised through investment in records management; simply that this is yet to be proved meaning that as a minimum any such claims should be qualified accordingly.

The literature that does exist and which seems at first glance to indicate some evidential basis to the kind of claims made above appear after more detailed examination to be deeply flawed: either in their origins, their methodology or – in some notable cases – even their very existence!

Why does this matter?

It may be tempting to seek comfort in Albert Einstein's oft quoted maxim: *"Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted"*, particularly as records management has traditional strengths in delivering the kind of non-tangible benefits already mentioned. That temptation should be resisted for the following reasons:

- Without empirical evidence demonstrating the benefit and 'return on investment (ROI) realised through records management we should never make claims to this effect when proposing investment in this area
- This will inevitably make records management projects a 'harder sell' – particularly in a harsh economic climate – limiting investment and, ultimately, influence
- It leave current records management services in a weaker position than areas of the business who are able to demonstrate the 'value' they deliver, therefore leaving it potentially vulnerable if budgets are being cut and staffing levels reduced
- A declining economic environment is, through necessity, likely to force management to take a more pragmatic approach to operational risk, weakening many of the traditional 'non-tangible' benefits of records management

- Without evidence to demonstrate value and ROI management may conclude that records management represents part of the bureaucratic ‘problem’ (gold-plating, red tape etc) rather than part of the solution.
- Without accurate evidence relating to impact and ROI the records management profession itself cannot have confidence in its approach. Nor is it able to identify where it is most effective and which elements of it offer greatest ‘bang for the buck’. Such gaps in its professional knowledge risks severely damaging its credibility and its ability to improve and grow.

What are we doing about it?

In order to try to address some of these issues JISC infoNet is currently engaged on a JISC-funded project aimed at ‘Creating a common research framework for measuring the impact of records management’.

The main objectives of this project are:

- 1) To conduct a literature review to ascertain to discover the current evidence base for demonstrating the benefit of implementing records management processes. An attempt will also be made to discover relevant *unpublished* sources of evidence which may have been established for internal purposes within organisations.
- 2) To create an openly accessible ‘Common Research Framework’ It is envisaged that the Framework will include the means by which any organisation considering or currently engaged in an initiative to improve the management of records and information can capture and measure 3 distinct sets of data:
 - Benchmark data (i.e. the time and resources taken to undertake a business process *now*)
 - The costs of implementing the chosen RM solution (including both direct costs – such as software licence costs etc and indirect costs – such as the costs associated with end-users attending training sessions). It should be noted that a ‘solution’ does not necessarily imply a ‘system’ and that the framework will be able to incorporate any type of improvement to records management
 - Post-implementation data (i.e. a repeat of the data collected for set 1 but for after the implementation of the selected RM solution). The Framework will also enable Set 3 data to be added and compared over an extended period of time (e.g. after 1 month, 3 months, 6 months and 12 months). This will enable a more complete picture of the impact of implementing RM solutions to be derived through looking at its results in the immediate, short and medium term.

Funding permitting we are then hoping to support some institutions who may be interested in piloting the framework and publishing the data produced.

Timeframe

The outputs from this project are scheduled for release in the autumn of 2009.

Contact

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