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Integrated Information Management

A Roadmap to Assess Your Organization's Information Priorities

Introduction

Organizations of all kinds and sizes are finding themselves faced with an array of information management challenges. Some of these challenges, like the transformation of information technologies and the growth of data sets, have remained relatively unchanged for years. Other challenges, like the intense scrutiny of personal data privacy, are new. Combined, they force us to reimagine and reengineer our processes for the better.

If you've been putting off that reengineering process, now is the time to get it done. With the right approach, you can make significant strides in improving the management of your information assets and processes. Doing so will make your organization leaner, meaner, and more efficient.

Navigating the vast landscape of your organization's data can be daunting. To harness the power of your information, you'll need a strategic approach to prioritize and manage it. We hope the following pages can serve as a guiding compass, offering a comprehensive roadmap to help you assess and align your organization's information priorities. Let's explore the key milestones and considerations that will enable you to chart a course towards effective information management, ensuring that your organization not only survives but thrives in the data-driven landscape of today and tomorrow.

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Map Your Journey

There's a temptation to want to do something, anything, to get started. That can often be the road to ruin. Organizations sometimes make a huge investment, or embark on some other big initiative, without first thinking things through. This is sure to produce results that waste years of time and a ton of money.

First, you need to set table stakes. Confirm where you are now, and where you want to be for each stage of your integrated information management plan, including the all-important end goal. Figure out what brought you to where you are now and where you want to be in the end. Be specific and seek to understand, with direct information from key stakeholders, what the drivers are for an integrated information management initiative. A successful implementation means understanding what the issues are around access to information, industry and/or regulatory compliance, as well as associated budgets and funding. It's likely that a combination of factors will drive how you think about the end goals.

As you formulate your project consider these questions:

» What are the primary business factors driving this initiative?

» Who are the primary stakeholders?

» How will this initiative make the organization stronger?

» What are the top outcomes that need to occur as a result of this integrated information management initiative?

Inventory the Formats and Processes

An organization's information processes often grow in dribs and drabs, without a strategy and little or no central planning or oversight. That's part of what you're trying to fix, but that knowledge is also central to any go-forward strategy. You may find that you need to do some digging and thinking to get a clear idea of where you are and how you'll achieve what you need to.

Understanding which processes are taking place in what repositories and in which media is a key factor in any improvement. If a process isn't working effectively, you need to know exactly what that process is and how it operates in order to improve it. Chances are you have both electronic and paper processes, so you need to know how each works and if they feed into each other. If it's a paper process, you need to confirm some details – workflows, procedures, and the like – to determine if they can be improved upon or replaced. If you have an electronic process or system, you need to understand what it does for you and how well it performs.

Key considerations for formats and processes include:

- Are we paper-intensive?
- Are we digital-first?
- Do we seek to be digital-first?
- Are records-related processes manual or automated via systems?
- Is there a way to automate manual processes?
- Have digital systems been adopted accurately by end-users?

Assess Your Current Program

You need to audit your current information programs and systems. This part of the assessment is key. Identifying and analyzing strengths and weaknesses is essential to your goal of a better, more efficient integrated information management program.

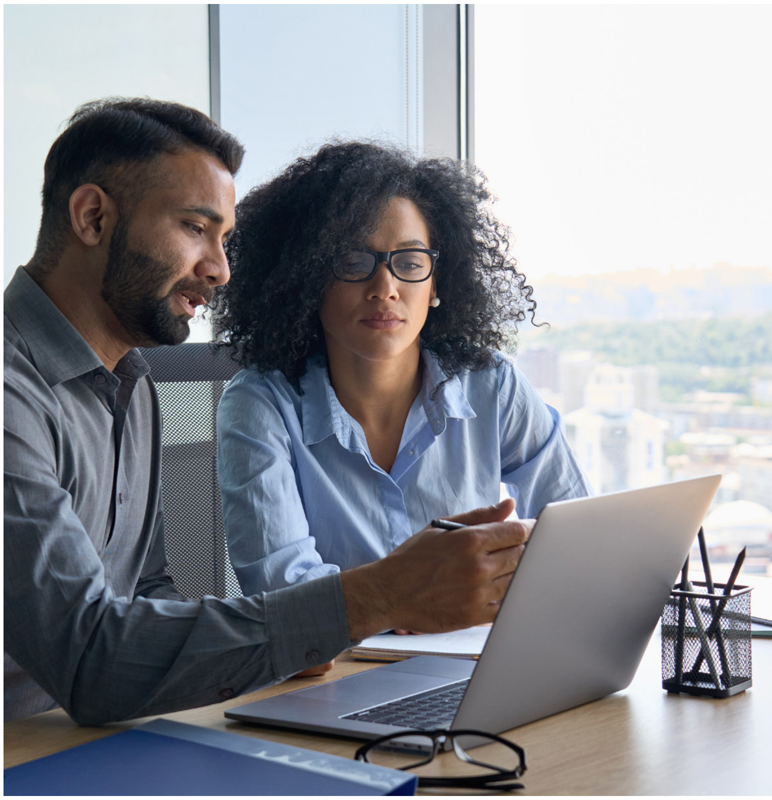
To understand what "better" looks like, you will need to assess both the quality and location of your information. According to Microsoft, the average mid-sized business has 10 or more information systems. Experience dictates that these systems tend to be of varying quality and often are not integrated with each other. A full assessment of what you have will help you establish what you actually need.

Every organization has processes or systems that could work better. There's no "best" fix for any problem. What's best is dependent on a lot of factors, but none is more important than defining what a "better" state really looks like. It could be as simple as redesigning some workflow, or as complicated as installing an enterprisewide IT solution. And with every potential solution comes a series of challenges and costs that will weigh on the ultimate decision.

At the end of the day, you're imposing some solution, large or small, to fix a problem. The solution needs to improve some outcome that is meaningful to your stakeholders. To do this, you need to understand exactly what that improved outcome is supposed to look like after the fix. Far too many organizations don't bother to establish goals for their information management initiatives. The result is an expensive, failed solution that doesn't produce the right outcomes.

8 Questions to Ask Yourself:

- What's working well?
- Do you have an accurate inventory of all digital and paper repositories?
- How much paper do you have across the organization?
- How much electronic data do you have?
- What is the process for determining if paper records are stored onsite or offsite?
- Are there information silos that need to be alleviated?
- Are there challenges with information processes that need to be fixed?
- Are there information access obstacles that need to be addressed? (i.e. remote access, security, privacy)



Create Your Timeline and Budget

Determine how quickly you want to get from here to there. Then assess how quickly you can get from here to there with the budget and resources available. As you set your timeline and budget evaluate if there are necessary budgetary requirements or regulatory deadlines that are driving this initiative.

Substantial changes to your information processes will take some time, even under ideal circumstances. If you want to make reasonable headway, you'll need a timeline with achievement milestones. Interim milestones help break down the project into reasonable chunks. Once the project kicks off, these milestones will allow you to measure progress. Be reasonable – the organization isn't going to stop everything else to get this done, and there will be roadblocks. Get stakeholder buy-in on the timeline before project launch to eliminate as many obstacles as possible.

Short-term and long-term budgets are critical to your end solution. Pretty much any reengineering, even when it saves money over the long term, will incur short-term costs. And some, like large IT acquisitions, will be very expensive. What you can do and how quickly you can do it will depend critically on how much money you have to spend for the duration of the initiative. The implementation period could be multi-month or even multi-year depending on the depth of the initiative. Additionally, there may be on-going fees associated with a new IT infrastructure, vendor contracts, or software investments.

With budget and timeline, it's important to ask the big questions first. Following are a few to ponder:

- Are there regulatory requirements with associated deadlines driving this initiative?
- Are there internal deadlines driving this initiative?
- What is the budget?
- Is there funding available through multi-department needs?
- Can the first year be expended as a capital improvement?
- What is the post-implementation budget?

Focus on Strategy and Available Resources

It's easy to assume that everything can be handled by an internal team. Ultimately, that could be more costly than hiring an expert. Executing on a highly complex program is incredibly time-intensive, which can shift the focus from being strategic to tactical. Once this happens, it's easy to lose sight of your goals.

The expertise is out there, but you do not need to outsource everything. If you have the time and resources, you can look inside your organization and determine what is feasible to do internally. It's recommended that you outsource the items for which you don't have the internal expertise or time. Direct your budget to the more complex parts of the project where bringing in experts will really make a difference.

Staying focused on strategy requires reflecting honestly about internal capabilities. Start by asking yourself and your team the following:

- What resources are available for this project and is there a limit to the number of hours available?
- Do you need to hire additional staff as part of this project or is it better to hire an expert?
- What are the key areas of expertise essential to this integrated information management initiative that you have at your organization?
- Do you need to outsource portions of this project due to lack of expertise?

Taxonomy and Metadata are Crucial

Many organizations have metadata that is not well managed, incomplete, or non-existent. Repositories are activated and filled with data with either no metadata rules, nonsensical rules, or unenforced rules, resulting in no meaningful organization at all. This can be the case for both hard copy and electronic records. Poorly named paper files with no indexing schema are no different than electronic records with bad metadata. Same problems, different formats.

As you embark on an integrated information management initiative, you must remember that most information systems do not come with a built-in metadata schema. You must develop your own. At best, some solutions have a templated metadata schema. It's certainty not the same as yours. At minimum you will have to modify either your existing metadata architecture, or request changes to the new system. This lack of metadata schema is true for systems that manage electronic records as well as for systems that manage paper files. It's common to see failures because an organization bought an expensive package but didn't bother to develop a data structure and metadata schema for it, creating an unstructured mess.

Creating a taxonomy and metadata that improves upon what you have requires you to reflect on what is and isn't working. Start by asking the following:

- Does the current taxonomy and metadata work for your organization?
- How will you design the taxonomy and metadata to leave room for new information types?
- Do you have resources for each repository that can map the old metadata schema to the new solution?
- Are there metadata fields that should be updated or abandoned?
- Can the receiving system take more and different metadata?
- Can you concatenate fields to fit new restrictions or automate processes?

It's important to remember that you don't have one big problem, you have lots of smaller challenges. And they are not all equal – some are more or less important than others. Some things may be working just fine, and don't need changing at all. The changes you do make could range from a minor process change, to a wholesale adoption of a replacement process, a complete technology change, something in between, or something different. Work back from your outcomes to decide what's best; don't work from the proposed solution to the outcome.

Don't assume that the big, complex solution is the best one. Maybe it is, but maybe it's not. If the solution can't be implemented in a thoughtful manner which aligns with your end goals, it is doomed. Choose a solution that can be effectively implemented.

Project Launch: Begin With the End in Mind

You've assessed what is working and created a list of desired outcomes. When it's time to launch the project, start with the outcomes and work backwards. Far too many organizations do the reverse. The result is a technology solution built on paper-based processes. This typically makes for an expensive, inefficient information management program.

Congratulations! You're ready to contemplate what project launch looks like. Before proceeding, reflect upon the following questions:

» What valuable outcomes will be improved through an integrated information management solution?

» Are there options that should be eliminated right away because they are not in alignment with business goals?

» Which options are most likely to align with our desired outcomes?

» Do we need to adopt smaller, targeted solutions in the short-term?

» Is it better to engage in a long-term program overhaul?

Considerations for Your Specific Environment

Now that you have level set on where you are currently and where you're headed, there are still additional considerations dependent on information format. It's likely that your organization will lean towards either a paper-intensive direction or head the opposite way and strive for a digital-first program. It's unlikely for most organizations to ever become truly "paper free." The key here is to choose a direction and then build systems and processes that are part of the business workflow, so end users don't have to think about whether or not they are handling the information correctly.

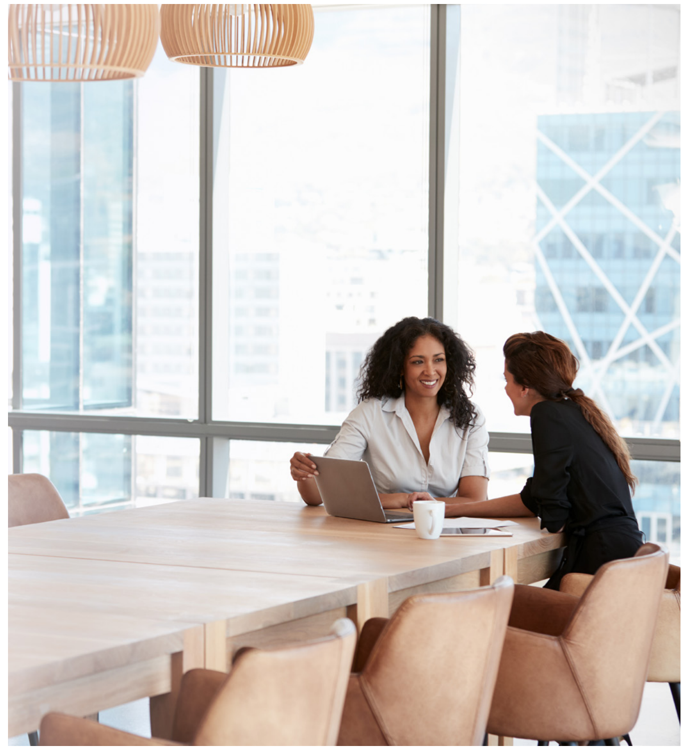
Paper-Intensive Environments

Let's suppose that you have lots of onsite paper files in an active filing space. The information is located in corporate offices, which is a great advantage when everyone is physically there. However, with remote and hybrid work models, that is not always the case. Plus, real estate is expensive and it's a prime area for cutting unnecessary costs. It's time to determine the best way to develop long-term, secure solutions that work for your organization. Here are five things you could do to remedy the situation:

Do nothing and leave the filing situation as is. This is by far the easiest thing to do, but probably the worst. If you really need every file to remain in a paper format in order to conduct business, you've got a big problem to fix. The need to access files remotely has increased and this trend is likely to continue. Relying on couriers and other physical delivery systems to retrieve files is both costly and inefficient.

Box up the records, move them offsite, and retrieve boxes. If file retrieval needs are infrequent and/or predictable enough that you can retrieve whole boxes, this could be the right solution. Your business can offload or repurpose office space that was previously used for storage and save a lot of money. You will need to select a vendor who is dependable and can provide service-level agreements that meet your business needs.

Move inactive files to offsite storage and retrieve digitally. Organizations choose offsite storage because the associated real estate costs are less expensive, and it allows them to focus their staffing expenditures on information professionals with a strategic mindset. Retrieving files digitally is typically referred to as "scan on demand." In this scenario, your records reside offsite in a records warehouse. When you need a file, the vendor scans it, and places it in a designated repository. Organizations can further expand the benefits of this service by developing rules about when to use permanent vs. convenience copies, using return to shelf vs. secure destruction, and incorporating metadata application as part of their scan on demand process.



Digitize all the paper. Your whole paper collection can be scanned, indexed, and placed in a designated repository – by you or a vendor. You could, in theory, do this yourself, but if it's a big collection, you may want to engage a vendor. They can usually do it quicker, cheaper, and more effectively than you can. Seek a vendor who is willing to evaluate if you really need to scan it all. As you go through this process you may find documents that would be cheaper to store or destroy. This can represent a cost savings on your overall project and could reduce compliance risks that come from holding documents longer than the regulatory and jurisdictional obligations require.

A repository is required. Repositories are necessary, but not all repositories are created equal. As noted in the section about taxonomy and metadata, most solutions do not come with an understanding of how your business describes and retrieves information. Nor do they understand which documents contain sensitive information and how long that information needs to be maintained. If you convert paper to a digital format, you will need to choose, develop, and maintain some sort of repository.

Which solution is best? Each has its own pros and cons, and its own costs and challenges. The option you implement should be based upon a cost-benefit analysis of each approach, factoring in the cost and difficulty of the tasks, moves, conversions, and other activities involved. Your organization has unique business requirements, and the resulting solution should address those requirements.

Digital-First Environments

Let's suppose you have lots of unstructured electronic data in an unmanaged environment, like an old and badly managed SharePoint directory. And let's suppose further that this is real, necessary information with legal implications associated with payroll, safety, health, or licensing. Whatever the case is for your organization, it's not working optimally. Following are some actionable scenarios you could consider to improve your current information solution:

Do nothing and leave it as is. As with paper, if you can find everything without too much complexity and within a reasonable timeframe, this solution might be fine. It becomes an issue when end-users are not able to access information, unauthorized users gain access to sensitive information, or if the organization has trouble identifying sensitive information or information that needs to remain in compliance with a law or industry regulation. Those issues cost money in the form of time lost, data breaches, lawsuits, and fines.

Automate governance and information across multiple solutions. Most point solutions have an ability to connect via an API to your existing systems to automate governance and increase efficiency. Advanced solutions will offer dynamic synchronization across multiple systems. This is an important consideration. For example, you may need to send information about contracts from Microsoft 365 into a repository that connects via an API to your financial system. You may also need to securely store and retrieve HR documents and sync with an HRM solution.

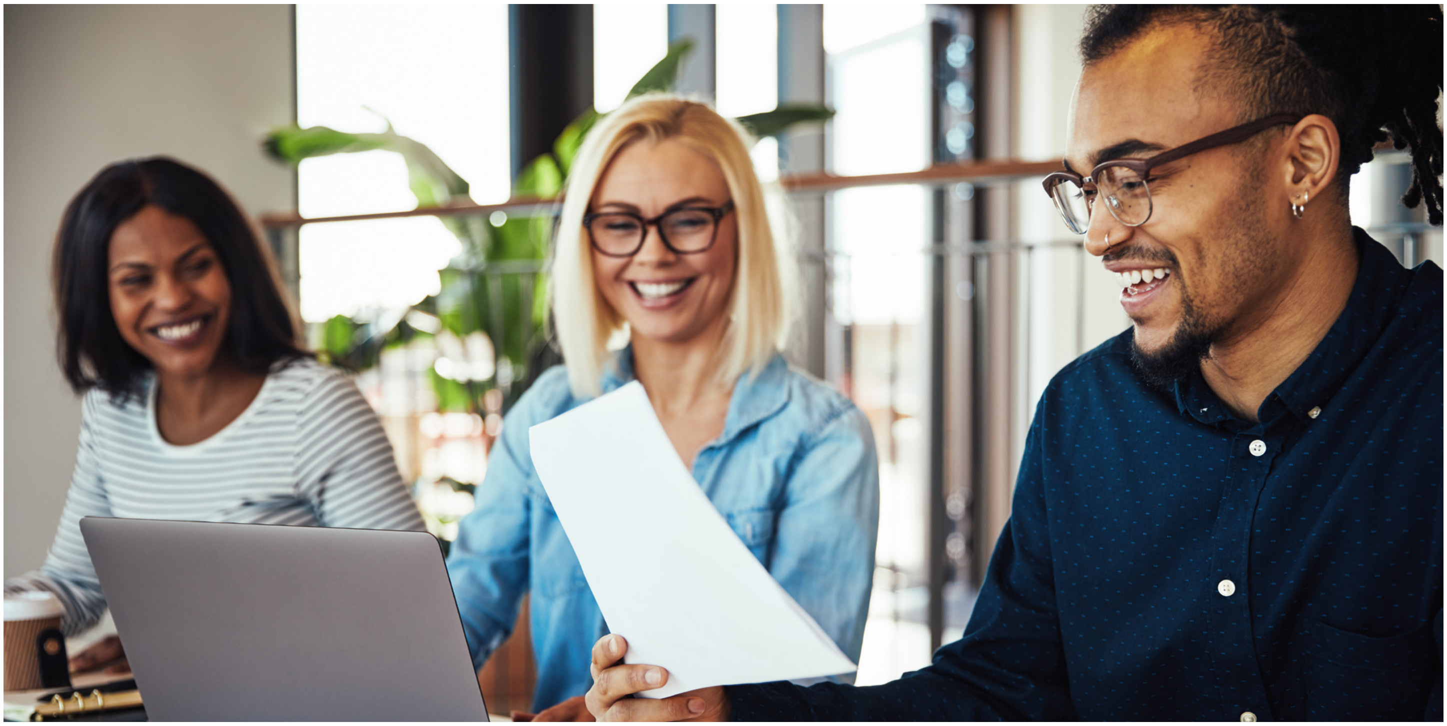
Implementing such an integrated solution will require an in-house team or vendor that understands the complexity of managing information across multiple systems. These tools can help you build a good structure to manage information, but you still need the labor resources to configure, manage, and analyze it.

Move your documents to a document management solution. The midpoint between a very targeted solution and an ERP system is a document management solution. These systems try to balance all the related complex and competing factors, while giving you as much flexibility as possible. However, you're dealing with the fact that the designers have a particular vision in mind about what the software is supposed to do, what user demands will be placed upon it, what regulatory requirements it needs to respond to, and so on. Implementing this solution will require a team that understands what types of legal and industry compliance obligations are essential to your organization. Additionally, you are going to need team members that can decipher if the technology is capable of managing and applying the policies in accordance with your compliance obligations.

Adopt a plenary structured environment. A plenary environment is one that is all encompassing. It would require adopting or upgrading an enterprise resource planning (ERP) solution that helps you run your entire business, supporting automation and processes for all departments. ERP vendors will purport to be able to handle ALL your data from ALL your processes in a single unified system. It sounds like a dream, but the truth is that they typically require customization. If your requirements don't mesh well with the ERP's core capabilities, be prepared for a costly implementation. Records teams will find that plenary solutions often need to be customized or augmented with point solutions to cover compliance and retention concerns. This is true even for large multinational organizations with big budgets.

The plenary nature of an ERP means that information is managed in a way that can make the application of policies difficult. For example, you may discover that your ERP system has a single process for purging records. If you happen to be doing business in multiple countries, each will have different privacy laws and requirements for purging records. If your new ERP system only has single process purging capabilities, it will not be able to handle these complex business requirements. Given the increase in privacy legislation in the United States, this is likely to be an issue for domestic organizations as well. The key takeaway here is to keep your legal requirements in mind.

Which of these solutions is correct? Any of them can work, but to make them work well, you need to make sure that the solution you're adopting addresses the outcomes you need. On-going expenses will need to be factored into any digital solution. There will be data mapping, conversion, and implementation fees in your first year, but don't forget that subsequent years will have licensing and maintenance fees.



Partner With the Experts

Use this roadmap and list of considerations to help to guide your way. Remember, Rome wasn't built in a day, but a steady approach with your eye on the prize will get you over the finish line.

To help you get on the right track straight away, we recommend working with your Access Representative who can advise about the pros and cons of each option. Additionally, your Access Representative can provide best practices and tips based on the successes of other clients who have accomplished similar integrated information management initiatives.

If you don't have a dedicated Access Representative yet, get in touch with us today to get started on your journey towards efficient and effective information management.

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