

Getting started with Records Management: What you need to know

Tasked with tackling your firm's RM challenge? Start here

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An introduction to records management

Records management: those two words are enough to strike fear into the heart of any business executive and with good cause. The process of sorting, classifying, storing, scheduling and disposing of the monumental number of documents and artifacts created over a business' lifespan is a challenge for any organization, from a multi-national financial institution to the neighbourhood hardware store. Unfortunately, no matter how daunting a task it may seem, records management is a necessary component to establishing a reputation as a transparent, accountable and well managed organization.

So you know you need records management in some form. If you're reading this, you've probably been tasked with helping in the implementation process. So how do you get there? The first step is a mental one. The reality is that it is a journey, not one single monstrous hurdle, and one that is more than just a technical project. It's a business and cultural undertaking as well.

This whitepaper will focus on the key points of content management and records management (RM) and provide some insight on how to get started in a considered, staged way. It may well be that you'll find you need a robust records management solution. But you may also find you can get by with the tools and resources you already have at your disposal - at least in the short and medium term.

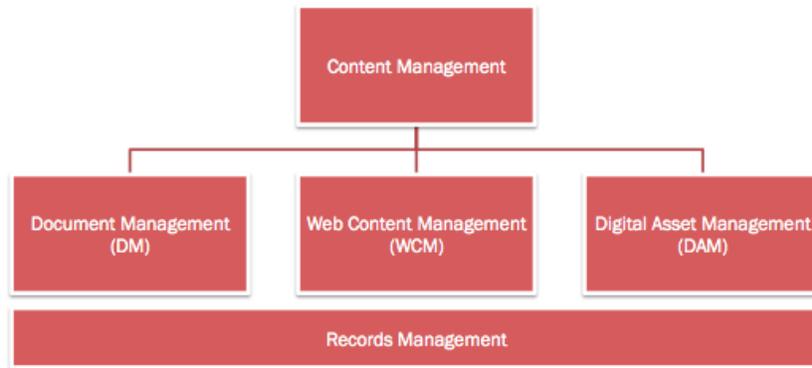
Understanding content management

Before beginning this journey you must familiarize yourself with two terms: records management and content management. These two are often used interchangeably but there is an important distinction. While content management refers to the entire collection of artifacts related to an organization, records management focuses on a subset: the most important, often confidential information that must be protected and conserved in a particular way based on legal and business considerations.

Before diving into RM, one must first understand the overarching umbrella term of content management. CM encompasses the entirety of all content, regardless of format, produced by any organization. As you can see in the diagram below, records management spans across all types of content.

Under the larger umbrella of Content Management there are three siblings:

- ~ Document Management (DM)
- ~ Web Content Management (WCM)
- ~ Digital Asset Management (DAM) [also often referred to as Digital Media Management (DMM)]



- ~ Document Management (DM) is the storage and management of electronic documents within an organization. Depending on your industry and purpose, document management can mean anything from a simple system for hosting a few hundred company corporate policies to a comprehensive system managing millions of customer documents in multiple languages that must be readily accessible by company locations around the globe.
- ~ Web content management (WCM) is the storage and management of electronic artifacts for websites. The websites may be public internet sites, private intranet sites or even some hybrid of public and private. Like DM systems, WCM systems can range widely in terms of size and complexity. It may be a compact system for a small business to manage its read-only public website, or it could be an enormous system to manage the web store for a massive global corporation that must accommodate multiple languages, multiple currencies, region-specific product catalogs and provide a personalized experience for millions of customers.
- ~ Digital Asset Management (DAM) is the storage and management of rich media like audio and video assets. Like its siblings, DAM systems can also vary widely in size and complexity. A common example of a small DAM system would be a marketing department within a corporation managing their videos and audio podcasts. At the other end of the spectrum would be a sports cable network that captures every minute of every single game for a professional sports league along with pre and post-game interviews and analysis. It requires a sophisticated system to be able to store and index such a tremendous volume of rich media in such a way that it is valuable to the organization.

Content management considerations

Regardless of the sort of content you're dealing with, there are a number of considerations to keep in mind. Answering these questions not only equip you to better manage and store your content, they're also important foundational questions as you prepare your records management strategy as well.

- ~ **Types:** What type of content do you need to store? Contracts? Web page fragments? Purchase orders? Game clips? Engineering drawings? And how can you tell the difference between them when they are in the content system?
- ~ **Formats:** What are the formats of the content you have to store? Simple HTML fragments? Two hour video files? PDF and MS Word documents? Does the content need to be available in multiple formats or languages?
- ~ **Metadata:** What information do you need to associate with content so it can be easily found (searched, browsed)? Is the information business oriented or customer oriented? Does the information need to be in multiple languages?
- ~ **Capture and retrieval:** How does the content get into the system? Is it uploaded directly or digitized and then uploaded? Does it come in one piece at a time or by the thousands? How do end-users access the content they need? From their desktops within the company? Or from tablets and smartphones when they are on the road?
- ~ **"Find-ability:"** How easy does it need to be for users to find content? Can they just browse to it through a folder structure like on a simple file-based DM system? Does there need to be a very advanced search capability with faceted browsing to help guide users to valuable content as in the case of a comprehensive product catalog on an ecommerce site?
- ~ **Security:** How sensitive is the content you need to store? Can it be accessed by everyone in the organization? Or everyone on the internet? Does some content need to be accessible to only specific teams, roles or even specific individuals? Is there content that is extremely sensitive that must be encrypted at all times until it reaches permitted individuals?
- ~ **Collaboration and sharing:** Do users within the organization need to collaborate in the creation or review of content? Does content need to be shared (securely) with others outside of the organization? Is the content intended to generate discussion in a public internet forum?
- ~ **Routing and workflow:** Does content need to be routed for approval or notification? Is there a sophisticated workflow that must be followed for content before it can be published or approved?
- ~ **Storage:** How much space do you need to store the content today? Next month? Next year? How quickly are you accumulating content?

- ~ **Monitoring:** How do you know if the content system is being used a little or a lot? Or if it is even useful to the organization or stakeholders? How do you know if any of the content is important or helpful to users?
- ~ **Governance:** Who is looking after what is going into the content system or how the content system is being used in general? Where does there need to be oversight? Or does there need to be any oversight at all?

So many questions to answer but all are important to content and records management planning. The difference is in the importance and details of those aspects. Even within a particular system, details may vary significantly depending on the domain and purpose of the organization. In the table below, we provide some examples of these aspects and examine the differences between the formats of content management.

Aspect	DM	WCM	DAM
Types	Contracts, policies, purchase orders, proposals, engineering drawings	Text fragments and pages, images, Stylesheets, Javascript	Audio, video, large images
Formats	MS Office documents, PDF, AutoCAD	HTML, CSS, JS	MPG, Flash, WAV
Metadata	Standard content metadata (author, creation date, MIME type, etc.), business data (client, customer)	Standard content metadata, product or service data (category, region)	Standard content metadata, encoding details, business or product/service data, event data
Capture and retrieval	Capture one at a time or in bulk, typically retrieved by users directly to their desktop, tablet or smartphone	More often captured one at a time, retrieved by a web runtime engine and served to the users on any number of platforms/ devices	Typically captured one at a time, retrieved by a rich media streaming service that will target the output to the device
"Find-ability"	Needs to be browsable and searchable via full-text and meta-data search	Typically searchable by metadata	Typically searched by metadata, but also by associated text in sophisticated systems
Security	Security needs vary between public, team, role and individual based access control within an organization	Security needs vary between public, team, role and individual based access control within an organization or across the internet	Security needs vary between public, team, role and individual based access control within an organization

Aspect	DM	WCM	DAM
Collaboration and sharing	Varies from no collaboration to highly collaborative document authoring between individuals inside and outside an organization	Varies from no collaboration for read-only website content to highly collaborative content in the context of a public internet discussion forum	Varies from no collaboration to collaborative authoring or discussion forum
Routing and workflow	Varies from no routing/workflow to a highly structured workflow as in the case of a high-value contract approval process	Typically only involves routing and workflow in the context of approving a piece of content for publication to a website	May involve routing / workflow in both a creation / approval context as well as for publishing to a website
Storage	Varies widely (from hundreds to millions of documents) depending on the domain and intent of the system	Varies widely (from hundreds to millions of documents) depending on the domain and intent of the system	Typically the number of items is not enormous, but the volume of digital media may be extreme depending on the domain and intent of the system
Monitoring	Typically requires some light usage monitoring, but in more secure environments there may be more sophisticated monitoring to look for suspicious behaviour	Varies from basic usage reporting to very sophisticated web analytics	Typically requires some light usage monitoring, but in more secure environments there may be more sophisticated monitoring to look for suspicious behaviour
Governance	Typically requires some governance to control who has access to the system and what content is kept within the it	Governance varies but as a minimum there are restrictions on who can publish content for broad consumption	Governance varies from minimal (when the system is used as a general repository) to much more strict access when publishing content for broad consumption

What is records management?

Once you've got your head around overall content management, it's time to dig into records management specifically. Under the umbrella of CM, records management relates to the collection and management of critically important, confidential, protected files considered essential to an organization. Examples of records include legally binding contracts, patents, financial documents, employment records etc. Let's look at the key aspects around records management:

- ~ **Business and legal requirements** will effectively dictate your records management requirements. In an organization, the business owners, along with their legal team, will determine the broad requirements around the types of content that must be maintained, for how long, and also determine when content should be disposed of for business and or legal liability reasons. There may also be government legislation or industry guidelines that may affect requirements, particularly if you work in a heavily regulated industry.
- ~ **Record categories and types** will depend heavily on the business domain along with the business and legal requirements. In any large organization there will be categories for things like finances, company policies and procedures, personnel and human resources and legal. Within those categories will be more specific record types that will typically identify the importance of a record (e.g. critical, useful, non-essential, etc.).
- ~ **Content classification** is an element of records management that has a very close relationship to content management types and metadata. Having well-defined content types with good metadata within a content management system makes the process of content classification much, much easier. One could say that it is mandatory to have good content types and metadata in order to classify content.
- ~ **Retention periods** are related to record categories and types and the way in which they are stored and eliminated. For example, a business may set forth a retention period that dictates that "employee contracts need to be maintained for seven years," after which they should be destroyed. The distinction of a measured amount of a time, in this case seven years, is known as the retention period. Once that period of time has elapsed, a disposition schedule dictates the timeline for electronically deleting whatever records have been marked for disposition. Referring back to our example, there may be a recurring disposition schedule that runs at the end of each month that states that all employee contracts older than seven years and one month are destroyed.
- ~ **Record holds** are a special event in the context of records management. A record hold is set if a piece of content is required as part of legal litigation. For example, if a senior executive is accused of influencing a contract decision, the contract and any other content (email, associated documents, collaboration comments, etc.) would also need to be placed on hold. To place content on hold means that it cannot be altered in any way. It also means that the metadata must remain intact and governance information (i.e. audit trail) be available and unaltered. Obviously this is very closely related to key aspects of content management; namely metadata, security, and governance. So a content management system that already has sufficient metadata, security and governance capabilities in place is yet another significant step in the direction of a proper records management implementation.

~ **eDiscovery** addresses the need for a records management system to act as an important part of a legal investigation, gathering and organizing content related to a case. For a RM implementation to be legally-defensible (i.e. it will stand up in a court of law), the system must have all aspects implemented as mentioned above, along with the associated policies, procedures and auditing in place to prove it. The field of eDiscovery is extensive and its full description falls outside the perimeters of this white paper.

So do I need a records management system?

You should now have a good understanding of records management and may start to wonder whether your organization is poised for an overhaul of an existing system or whether you need something completely new. Determining the level of necessity for a full-fledged RM solution must take a number of questions into consideration including “what are you trying to accomplish?” and “what do you mean by RM?” The answers to these questions will help you to determine the complexity of your system and the kind of functionality you will require.

While a records management purist would argue that a proper RM system is required, it is possible that your organization already has the tools they need to at least begin the RM journey. Software solutions like SharePoint, for example, can be configured to do records management, at least at a basic level. Your organization’s industry and its policies for document retention and disposition will also be a factor in your ideal type of RM system. The bottom line is that a number of adjacent questions must be answered before an organization truly understands their needs for records management. Simply going out and buying a new RM platform is rarely the right approach.

Challenges to overcome in RM

As with the introduction of any new system to an established workflow, challenges are inevitable. Oftentimes, organizations misattribute the root of these obstacles to technology, much to the dismay of the IT department. In reality, while technology does have an effect, governance and change management are often bigger factors in the adoption of new processes, whether you’re deploying a full-fledged RM system or extending your use of an owned system for RM purposes.

Governance

The traditional definition of governance refers to those who lead organized groups by establishing and enforcing rules, guidelines and best practices. We here at Nonlinear are big supporters of developing and implementing a governance structure for all major technology solutions, including the adoption of a strong RM system. The three main components of a governance structure are:

- ~ **Executive Ambassador:** Each organization should name one senior executive within the company who oversees the project. Making sure that someone around the C-Suite table has a serious stake in seeing the project succeed will go a long way in securing both the funds and the resources necessary for success. In many cases this should not be the CTO/CIO - as it often leads to an IT-centric outcome and does not help with the change management aspect. Bringing in someone from another line of the business also shows a broader corporate commitment to records management which can help with managing change.
- ~ **Steering committee or dedicated manager:** This role, whether it is taken on by a committee of employees or a records manager, is the most crucial to the setup of the structure. It is on this level that all research, recommendations and implementations are carried out. Determining the roles and responsibilities related to key questions (budget, maintenance, differentiating between regular content and important records etc.), while keeping the structure flexible enough to make changes as things evolve is key.
- ~ **Departmental advisor:** Each department in the company, especially IT, communications and legal, should have a RM advisor who will report to the steering committee or records manager on a semi-regular basis. It is their responsibility to make sure that the documents that need to be added, maintained and disposed of are receiving the proper care and attention.

Every day in every organization is a busy one, and with so many important elements to juggle, having a structure like this one in place will go a long way towards access to and maintenance of crucial business documents.

Change Management

As any business executive will tell you, plans are only as effective as the employees who enact them. Change management is imperative to the successful adoption of any new addition to an organization's workflow and should not be underestimated. Putting a RM system in place requires all employees to move from whatever makeshift storage and maintenance solutions they have employed, to a potentially new location guided by newly established rules.

Successful change management will incorporate these elements:

- ~ **Ambassadors/Early Adopters:** Establishing a small group of early adopters of the new RM system is the best way to begin changing the minds and methods of your workforce. Most organizations have a particular subset of employees who are motivated by innovation and appreciate the challenge of trying something new- engage them. Enthusiasm is contagious!
- ~ **Communication:** This one may seem obvious, but it is important to point out that communicating the changes you want to see happen to your employees in a clear, concise way will make all the difference. Organizations big and small face challenges in ensuring that everyone receives the same, complete information, but a good solution for delivering the new RM methodologies will help for proper adoption. Communication is also not a one-time event. To be effective it needs to be a constant effort.

- ~ Easy to find: Once you have crafted the policies and guidelines and communicated them to employees, storing them in a easily accessible and searchable location will help in expanding this RM solution from early onset adoption to a widely accepted and highly functioning system.

User experience

Creating a strong and intuitive user experience for your employees will go a long way in encouraging the adoption of your new RM solution. Our experience has shown, time and time again, that introducing a streamlined, easy to use program that allows users to intuitively navigate and interact is the key to acceptance. If the RM system that you introduce is difficult to use and unattractive, employees will almost certainly avoid it in favour of cloud sites or other alternatives. Creating a great user experience can sometimes be regarded as an insignificant part of this implementation. Addressing those elements that may seem to be superficial can be the catalyst for a deeper endorsement of the new system, ultimately saving time and money by avoiding workarounds that are often used as makeshift record management systems.

Shifting sands

As is often the case, once you begin to have an understanding of something, you realize it is already shifting and evolving into something else. Records management is no exception. There are many solutions already on the market that can address the needs we have discussed here and new solutions are being introduced as the nature of electronic records management expands. With the rising popularity of coupling business output with personal technology solutions, organizations are also dealing with a whole generation of employees who expect the work they're doing via their tablets and smartphones to be just as accessible and secure as what they are doing in the office. Mobile technology also amplifies the problem of content proliferation as more content is being produced from more places, within more applications, making it difficult to capture and maintain important records for an organization. While there's no easy solution to these challenges, making yourself aware of them is critical.

Conclusion

We hope that this whitepaper has made the thought of beginning the records management process a little less scary. Here we've touched on some key aspects of content management, their relationship to records management and discussed the importance of a governance structure and incorporating change management into any records management initiative. But this is only the beginning.

The fact is records management is a discipline unto itself. If your organization is in a heavily regulated industry or if the process and considerations in this paper have made you realize your needs are complex, you'll likely need to engage records management expertise to help define your solution set. However, we've found that most organizations can get at least partway down the path to RM simply by better using the tools they have at their disposal and by clearly defining their needs and requirements.

At nonlinear, we've helped a wide range of organizations better understand their records management needs and how they can best take advantage of the systems they already have in place to start moving down the road towards proper records management.

For more information on how we can help, contact us today:
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