



Less is More: The 7 Information Management Questions Every Organization Must Address to Thrive In the Digital Age

by Barbara Hemphill

Many companies continue to experience cutbacks in workforce, but not in workload. For the remaining employees, accessing valuable company information becomes increasingly complex, whether it's a password, an email from a vendor documenting price agreements, or crucial information about a client contract. The computer has allowed us to generate information as never before, thus increasing our ability to create a mess. Poor information management creates inefficiency. Inefficiency costs money, causes unnecessary stress, precipitates poor customer service, and directly costs untold thousands of dollars.

Michael Dell says that by 2020 the world will generate 35 times as much data annually as in 2010. Unfortunately, many companies never learned to manage paper, and most are not doing any better with electronic documents. Particularly frightening is that if you have 1000 pieces of paper, you can hire someone to sort through them looking for specific words, and eventually they will find them. If you have 1000 electronic documents stored in a variety of places from employees desktops (not backed up!) to external drives, they may never be found -- and when they are, the company may no longer has the capability of reading the data!

It's not a matter of IF, but WHEN the information management meltdown will take place, unless you address the issue now. The following are seven essential questions to address about the information in your business.

What Information Do We Need To Keep?

Start with your company's mission and goals. What business are you in? What information do you need to reach those goals? And, of course, what information do regulators require? You can jokingly state that the word "archives" should be spelled "our-chives" since so many companies keep information that actually belongs to other organizations.

In What Form?

Most information today is already in digital form. In many organizations, that information can be stored in more than one program. Consistency is the key.

Only a small portion of the information that exists on paper today is worth converting to a digital format. As the quantity of information received and generated by business increases, electronic storage options become essential. It is simply not cost effective to use paper for long-term storage of business information.

For How Long?

Employees are scared to throw anything away, because the boss may ask for it, and many bosses won't take the time to make a plan for records retention. When they do, the decision often breaks down in the implementation. The advantages of electronic storage can become disadvantages, as companies painfully learn when called to account for e-mail messages sent years previously. Regardless of the reasons, the results are the same: overstuffed filing cabinets and hard drives.

Many companies hold file clean-out days, and but often fail miserably. Why? Because management has failed to create the methodology, mechanics, and maintenance to enable and empower its employees to make the decisions required to eliminate unnecessary information.

Who Is Responsible for Filing It?

One client was spending thousands of dollars annually on file storage. When they looked into the situation, they identified that one big source of the problem was that multiple members of the team were filing the same information for the same project. The problem was quickly resolved by identifying a specific member of each team to be responsible for filing the appropriate information.

Every large company has an information systems person. While some large companies have a person in charge of records retention, they are often brought into the picture only after the files are full or the information is no longer used on a regular basis. Small businesses often ignore the issue entirely. Why not put someone in charge of making and implementing decisions about current information? It is essential to create a system so if a person leaves suddenly, the company is not left in jeopardy.

Who Needs Access To It?

A major challenge in information management relates to the liability created if/when unauthorized people access private data. An advantage of an electronic filing system is the ability to determine who has access to what documents. It is? unnerving?to walk into offices and see paper and electronic documents accessible to people who have no reason to access them!

How Can We Find it?

The three components to an effective filing system are:

1. File methodology - what documents are to be filed
2. File mechanics - how documents are filed
3. File maintenance - when documents are eliminated

If any of the components are weak, your filing system will be an ongoing frustration instead of the resource it can and should be.

How Is It Backed Up?

A client lost 30 years of research because of a miscommunication with the IT department. A survey by Adobe of 5000+ professionals found that 43% have lost important electronic documents, and 70% of those losses were caused by a computer or hard drive failure. Having a backup plan that is checked on a consistent basis is an important part of an information management system.

Clutter is postponed decisions. Countless companies are faced with the problem of hundreds, even thousands, of boxes of "archives" in storage rooms or off-site locations. Unfortunately, when management realizes the cost and the risk involved, and finally decides to do something, the people who created the paper are long gone, and current employees have little energy or motivation for making decisions about something that doesn't affect their ability to leave work on time.

While there is no quick fix for years of postponed decisions, avoiding the problem in the future is easy. Today's mail is tomorrow's pile, so to get results, ignore the mistakes of the past. Create a system today to enable employees to make good decisions about the information they receive.

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