



Now What

You understand the need to control your information. Moving from understanding to action requires you to develop a strategic plan for your records and information management program.

- Helen Streck

Each year, companies spend millions of dollars on technology to create records and information. After years of adding and upgrading tools that increase the volume of electronic documents, these same companies are now waking up to the fact that controls are needed to manage this vast mass of information. In all companies, designing and implementing the right controls to manage the records and information overload has reached a critical point; the right controls that records and information management (RIM) program can provide. These companies are discovering the value of having a RIM program. Yet knowing that you need a RIM program and then acting on that knowledge is a difficult gap to cross. Getting a RIM program implemented requires different skills than just familiarity with technology.

Executives are beginning to ask serious questions about spending the needed resources to bring in a subject matter expert or a team that can design a RIM program in order to reduce the company's risks of possible sanctions or fines for not being able to demonstrate adequate controls. The RIM expert selected must be able to come into an organization and grasp—very—quickly the strength or weakness of a company's effort in managing its information. That person must understand the current risk and translate those risks into drivers to gain support for developing the needed controls. The time to take the first step in creating a RIM program comes after you understand your current situation and clearly articulate your risk exposure. And that first step? Build a strategic plan. The failure to create a strategic plan with the appropriate program boundaries and vision will generally lead to missing the mark on your goals. A strategic plan identifies the program mission and vision. The mission and vision set the program boundary. A strategic plan also lays out the order of initiatives and timeline needed to develop the program components.

Before drafting a strategic plan, determine your answer to this question: "What is our risk tolerance to the identified risks?" This exercise identifies the drivers for the program and the order in which the controls need to be developed. There are a number of different types of controls that can be developed throughout the information lifecycle. Controls can be placed at the point where information is created and run all the way through to disposition until the record or information is deleted.

Some of the different type of controls you may need along the lifecycle of the information include:



- access rights, access rights,
- classification schemes,
- privacy protection,
- information security,
- vital records protection,
- archiving, and,
- retention and disposition.

Determine which controls the company needs, and then build a strategic plan. The plan will enable the subject matter expert or team to focus their efforts in delivering the controls in the order that reduces the most risk and enable compliance. A plan serves as a road map to determine the order in which work will be completed and the amount of time that work will take. There may be many initiatives and the plan serves as a way to prioritize the work based on risk and resource availability.

Without a plan, you cannot gauge the effort that it will take to get the job done. On the other hand, when companies do plan, they are amazed to learn that a modest investment in RIM with subject matter experts at the helm can achieve the required results in the most efficient manner and minimize the risk of millions of dollars in fines and sanctions. Still some organizations continue to say that a RIM program is not needed or it is an expendable part of our company. However, without a strategic plan, How can you tell? How can you possibly “see” the value that the program brings in reducing risk, minimizing discovery costs, and eliminating the waste of managing obsolete records and information.

Companies with mature RIM programs know that by designing and implementing controls over a set period of time and then managing these controls as a part of normal business operations is just the ounce of prevention worth its weight in gold. Not only will obsolete records and information no longer consume operating budgets, but that same obsolete records and information will not have to be identified, collected, preserved, and reviewed for relevance in the next litigation costing millions of dollars. Now you know what to do. Just take the step.

--Helen serves as records management consultant in Shook, Hardy & Bacon's Tort Section. Her expertise in records and information management has its foundation in real-world experiences forged from a career in the business that spans over 25 years. She has consulted on all aspects of records and information management, including the development and implementation of litigation hold protocols, electronic discovery response plans, and data privacy initiatives.

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