Hybrid Records: Lean Time Strategies for Electronic and Paper Records

By Alexandra (Sandie) Bradley, Harwood Information Associates Ltd.

A mix of electronic and paper records

The information assets of British Columbia local governments exist in multimedia formats as well as in "traditional" hard copy forms. Most of the recent information, produced within the past ten years, has been created in digital formats. Most of the decision making has been occurring in electronic messages. The older or legacy information is paper-based.

Iron Mountain, the leading paper storage company, has seen their paper records storage business grow at approximately 8 percent each year during the last decade. At the same time, general electronic formats are growing at 50% per year, and electronic mail at 60% per year[1]. In 1994, Gartner estimated that 80% of all information existed as paper documents with the remainder digital. Gartner estimated then that by the end of the 1990s, digital records would be 80%, compared to 20% paper. The reality is: far from it. Iron Mountain staff say the vast majority of records are still paper, while Steve Kass, an ECM practitioner, and president of Channel-Market Partners, a content management consultancy, estimates it closer toward the 50-50 range[2].

What does this mean for today's local government office?

In most municipal offices, staff have put effort to managing paper records, with a regime of filing protocols and approved procedures for storing and disposing of expired records. In contrast, there has been little or no strategic management of electronic records. The obligation is to manage records in whatever formats they appear.

Until recently, organizations could assume that the "official" record was almost always determined to be a printed or hard copy document. Now, however, it is possible to use electronic records as evidence, provided that they can be proven to be the genuine and authentic record[3]. However, if there are no documented systems of control over the electronic formats, it will be difficult to prove the reliability and integrity of the electronic forms.

A zero cost approach for lean times

Large municipalities are investing in electronic records or document management systems to provide this control. In these economic times of limited financial resources, however, smaller organizations may not have the capacity or the funding for these tools.

A management strategy rather than large amounts of dollars can bring your electronic asset management into alignment with your paperwork practices. Here is a low cost approach, using strategy, not systems. You will leverage your digital assets, and synchronize the approaches for all media in your organization.

- **Review policy environment**

It takes a comprehensive policy, married with practical procedures at the operating level, to encompass paper and electronic formats. Examine your policy or bylaw.[4] It should define what is a "record" and ensure the definitions encompass these digital formats also. The policy defines a records management system, as a series of processes to manage records from creation through to disposal. The policy also designates authorized persons to have control over the records management system. The policy designates a manual of procedures and policy to document the authorized actions with the records, including creation and organization, collection, access, disclosure, maintenance, retention, security, storage, preservation and disposal. The records management system must be in compliance with applicable laws and standards.

- **Develop strategies to address the various media**

Next, build a partnership with the Information Technology (IT) department. Develop specific strategies and procedures (the procedures manual referenced above) to guide users at the desktop. Apply a uniform approach to classify and apply retention to these digital formats. These processes will be tailored to the media and application system within which the digital records are created and maintained.

Some organizations begin with the "worst first". A system process review with IT staff will determine the best return for the time spent. Here are two recommendations.

- **Classify and apply retention to your drives and folders**

The most useful records management strategies involve classifying the digital records, and partitioning the network drives in a way that permits the application of retention schedules for disposal or preservation.

Establish "logical" network drives. Most organizations will set up "P" drives for staff work in progress, and "S" drives for departments or work groups to share final work. An "X" drive for archival or completed, read only, documents is also helpful to segregate the permanent records. If photographs or drawings are large formats to manage, set up a "G" drive for graphics. Partitioning the drives in this way will help IT departments to manage their back up processes.

"Classifying" involves setting up directory and folder structures that match the records classification. If there are ten years of past digital documents within the current network, adopt a "go forward" strategy. Pick a date, and then reorganize the directory and folder structure from that date forward. Instruct staff to move forward any documents they use or reference, classifying them into the relevant folders, either in their personal workspace on "P" or in the shared drive. Place the earlier documents in a ghost drive which is no longer seen or used by staff, but is still available if a future search is necessary.

Establish folders by subjects within these "new" drives, using the topics from the file plan. Keep this as simple and lean as possible – use the topic or subject rather than the file code. Staff should select only the topics they need for the individual "P" drives, while the "S" drive is the full records classification, in subject order. Staff in some organizations use a "to be filed" folder where completed documents are placed for the file clerk to classify and file. A regular review by a records management designate or virtual "file clerk" will ensure documents are filed in the right folders, and folders are closed and archived at appropriate times, according to the prescribed retention.

- **Electronic mail**

Electronic mail is probably your worst digital record challenge. Why? E-mail is where staff make most decisions. E-mail messages may have record value, if the message is about municipal business, or makes a commitment for the municipality. But too many routine, non-records are mixed in with the substantive messages documenting decisions or setting precedents. Usually these messages will be saved in folders within the application environment, password protected and not named or shared so that other staff can access them.

Teach staff the difference between a transitory or fleeting e-mail, and encourage them to delete the transitory e-mails as soon as they are read. Keep the substantive or business e-mails in folders by subjects, similar to the network folders above. Miminize the copying of information to staff who don't need to know about the decisions staff are making.

- **Scanning past files**

Paper documents that are actively referenced and shared by staff can be scanned into a digital format. Most offices now have some sort of scanning technology. Identify projects where the scanned information has high reference value, or where scanning will preserve the original documents from loss or wear. Procedures should be in alignment with Canadian scanning standards[5] to ensure that the evidentiary value of the images are preserved. The format of the scanned images, and whether they should also be searchable, will determine the specific digitial format or system that is used. Finally, scanning is a labour intensive activity, and there is no cost benefit of digitizing "just in case" or to reduce storage space of paper records.

Going forward

Conducting a regular review will ensure that no growing collections of unmanaged materials in any formats are accumulating in your offices and networks. Develop an implementation requirement that ensures, as new technologies are employed in your organization, there will be appropriate record keeping strategies to identify, classify and preserve the records produced from these systems into your information asset management. Such an approach will

ensure that digital records are accessible and available when needed, and maintained to leverage your investment in the tools.

[1] *Marcia Judd* "Don't Forget the Paper" AIIM Resource Center. www.aiim.org/ResourceCentre/Archive/Article. *Accessed May 4, 2009*

[2] *Ibid*

[3] *P. 47 Local Government Management Association.* Records Management Manual for Local Governments in British Columbia, *3rd ed. Victoria, LGMA, 2006.*

[4] *P. 86* Appendix A – Model Bylaw. Records Management Manual for Local Governments in British Columbia. *3rd ed. Victoria, LGMA, 2006.*

[5] *Canadian General Standards Board.* Micrographics and Electronic Images as Documentary Evidence *(including Amendment 1, April 2000). CAN/CGSB-72.11-93. Ottawa: Canadian General Standards Board, 2000.* www.techstreet.com.