

Records classification

The treasure map to your records

Information can be as valuable as buried treasure, and just as hard to find if it is buried in poorly-organized records.



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When I was a boy, my favourite story was Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. The remarkable thing about that story is that, although it is full of intrigue, and colourful characters, it centres on a record: a map to be precise. As the plot unfolds, whoever has the map has the upper hand. Whoever does not have the map is determined to get their hands on it. The map is invaluable because no one can retrieve the treasure without it.

The records management equivalent of a treasure map is your records classification system. It provides the central index, enterprise wide, of your company's record holdings. Like the map in *Treasure Island*, it is only valuable as long as it helps us find the records we need. An out of date map, or a map that we cannot understand, can be worse than having no map at all. The same is true of a records classification system.

Many organizations do not have a formal records classification system. This poses a number of problems. It seems to be human nature to put things away without considering the need to find them again. A glance at most people's tool shed will confirm this. Glance at most people's file cabinet or hard drive and you won't fare much better. This connection between storage and retrieval (i.e. putting things away so that we will be able to find them again)

seems to be something our minds have difficulty grasping.

Classification systems are also the backbone of some of the other records management tools we have been discussing in this column. It is much easier to develop a records retention schedule, for example, if a records classification structure is already in place to identify the records to be scheduled. Having a classification system also makes it easier to index inactive records for retrieval.

Some facilities management staff with records management responsibilities are asking how relevant records classification will be with the emerg-



ing technologies of the future. The consensus among records managers is "more relevant than ever!" For example, while it may be possible to scan as many as 1,600 pages per minute with today's document imaging scanners, each of those documents must be classified and indexed in order to retrieve the document from the system.

Electronic directories on file servers are organized into hierarchies of folders and sub-folders. If these hierarchies are not logical, they can become counter-productive, impeding record retrieval rather than supporting it. Most of us have hundreds of electronic mail

Executive viewpoint

The ability to make timely, well-informed decisions is hindered if an organization's information — in filing cabinets or on people's desktop computers — are not organized according to a records classification system by a records management professional.

messages in our in-boxes, simply stacked in the order in which they were received, with no reference to the file or matter to which they pertain. The result is a set of silos of records, with no integration between them, making it difficult to integrate all of an organization's information resources.

Work is under way now to provide tools to classify records automatically. To date, their success in the field has been questionable. Even if automatic document classification becomes a practical reality, this will not mean that classification systems are no longer needed. In order for a computer system to classify a document automatically, there must, by definition, be a classification scheme in place, as well as rules for its application. Automated classification may eliminate the routine drudgery of users classifying their records, but in exchange it will require a more rigorous approach to records classification than ever.

The key to making the most out of the content of your organization's records is retrieval. The most important tool for ensuring effective records retrieval is a corporate records classification system. It is your map for finding the valuable content contained in your organization's record holdings.

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