E-Guide

Best Practices for a Successful Information Governance Strategy
Implementing an effective information governance strategy is crucial to managing the large volumes of unstructured and structured data flowing through an organization; however, gaining executive buy-in and avoiding potential pitfalls can be challenging. This essential e-guide offers guidelines for measuring and demonstrating the value of an information governance program to top management, and highlights common mistakes to avoid when designing a program.

Measuring success of an information governance program not so simple
By: Chris Maxcer, Contributor

Effective information governance programs can help organizations maintain control of both their structured data and the growing volumes of documents and other unstructured data being stored electronically. But for many information governance program managers, proving the value of governance initiatives can be a complicated matter, particularly if corporate executives want to see tangible results from an enterprise’s investment in governance processes before offering support or renewing funding.

“In order for information governance to have teeth, we need to illustrate the ongoing value it drives,” said Jill Dyche, co-founder of Baseline Consulting Group Inc. in Sherman Oaks, Calif. “Unfortunately, this is easier said than done.” It’s important to try, though, in order to show executives that promises made to them about the benefits of information governance are being kept, she added.

“There is currently a big debate in the [governance] community about how to measure or justify information governance,” said Barclay T. Blair, president and founder of ViaLumina Group Ltd., a New York-based consulting firm that focuses on information governance. “Some argue that traditional measurements like return on investment [ROI] are too narrow to capture the
true value. Others argue that unless the value of information governance can be measured using these well-established techniques, it will never fly.”

Blair added that he is “somewhere in the middle.” Using ROI or total cost of ownership (TCO) calculations can provide some hard evidence of business benefits, but it tends to do a poor job of measuring the costs associated with governance risks and the value of avoiding them, he said.

Maintaining executive buy-in for an information governance program is critical, so understanding the motivations of executive sponsors and other key members of your management team is a good place to begin, Blair said. “Who is asking you to calculate the success of your information governance efforts? What is important to them? What are their favorite topics or projects? What has worked in the past? You need to be able to answer these questions before you even get started,” he recommended.

**Telling stories about information governance benefits**

Next, focus on storytelling, Blair advised. “The single most effective technique that I have used to measure and communicate the value of information governance is through personal case studies,” he said. Choose a small number of people in your organization and profile their work environment before and after the launch of an information governance program, Blair said. Then the improvements in information access and consistency that they’re hopefully seeing can be extrapolated to other people in similar roles.

According to Rob Karel, a principal analyst at Forrester Research Inc. in Cambridge, Mass., another handy technique for measuring the success of an information governance framework is choosing a single process to measure. For example, he cited the case of a financial services firm that used its governance program to more consistently capture accurate and validated customer email addresses. That enabled the company to save millions of dollars in postage and marketing-collateral costs by replacing direct-mail marketing programs with email campaigns, Karel said.
Indeed, there’s a tendency on the part of some program managers to try to measure the value of every element of an information governance program. But that means they might quantify, say, 25 tangential benefits in an effort to create an eye-popping value proposition, said Barry Murphy, co-founder and principal analyst at eDiscoveryJournal LLC, an online publication and consulting firm based in Austin, Texas.

Murphy’s advice: Fight the urge to measure everything -- bigger is usually not better in this case. "The companies that find success," he said, "are looking at their projects in focused, yet granular, ways."

Dyche warned that efforts to demonstrate the success of information governance programs can go off track at the start, when organizations try to create baseline metrics. "Measuring the ‘current state’ of your business is often the hardest part of information governance," she said. "It’s often the reason that the entire program falters." Executives might want to see hard numbers to justify governance initiatives – but Dyche said she has told several clients that by the time they fully understand the costs of things such as multiple data integration and cleansing efforts and having different versions of the same document in their systems, "we could have come up with governance processes that would streamline or eliminate those processes."

Start with a small, controlled project based on an acknowledged business problem that information problems are enabling, Dyche suggested. "Build some formal processes and rules around accessing, cleansing, integrating and deploying that data," she said, adding that when demonstrable results and improvements have been repeated a few times, sound information governance practices should become systemic.

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Avoiding the common pitfalls of information governance management

Given the organizational complexities and internal process changes typically associated with enterprise-wide information governance initiatives involving emails, corporate documents and other types of unstructured data, it’s often easier to derail projects than it is to chart a course to success.

Industry analysts and consultants nearly unanimously agree that the biggest impediment to long-term information governance success is the lack of a rightful program "owner" – one with enough authority and broad enterprise support to focus a governance initiative and keep business stakeholders engaged.

It’s often assumed that the IT department should be handed responsibility for information governance management because it’s the keeper of the systems that house the data. But while some chief information officers are indeed good candidates for the program owner role, analysts said it’s more commonplace that information governance leadership falls into the hands of IT practitioners, who typically don’t have the enterprise clout or strategic vision to elevate a governance program beyond tactical data-housekeeping policies and procedures.

“There is one mistake that everyone makes, and it’s so big that it categorically doesn’t allow people to succeed with information governance – that is, they do not delegate responsibility for this problem at a senior-enough level,” said Barclay Blair, president and founder of ViaLumina Group, a consulting and professional services firm that specializes in information governance.

Information governance programs “that have been built through a grass-roots effort and have lip service paid to them by senior management aren’t really addressing the problem in the right way,” Blair added. “Because when it comes time for hard issues that really impact what employees do on a day-to-day basis, [lower-level employees] back off and don’t actually make the changes.”
Beyond not making information governance management a high-profile corporate priority, there are a variety of other errors that can trip up companies. Here is a look at some of the most common pitfalls, as identified by Blair and other analysts:

**Scoping the program too widely.** Taking an overzealous view of information governance as it pertains to every bit of data across an entire organization can be dangerous to keeping a program on track. As part of scoping a project, organizations need to examine the business case for information governance and make a concerted effort to tie the identified pain points and goals directly to the highest-priority content in their systems. “It turns out we have tons of data, but not all of it holds the same value or level of risk to the enterprise,” said Ted Friedman, an information management analyst at Gartner Inc. An information governance best practice, Friedman said, is to avoid trying to tackle everything at once and instead focus on the key parts of the unstructured data landscape.

**Treating governance as a cultural misfit.** Not every organization places a value on information as an enterprise asset, and for those companies that don’t, creating an information governance framework and trying to enforce governance policies may be a lost cause, according to the analysts. But, they warned, it isn’t easy to change a corporate culture that results in business units hoarding their own information in silos into one that embraces information sharing and governance as a collective cause. “Socialization and getting agreement across areas – that might just be the hardest part of all,” Friedman said. He noted that in some companies, the term governance itself denotes lockdown and control, serving as a turn-off for business users. To avoid that kind of pushback and help facilitate a shift in thinking, Friedman recommends the use of broader terms, such as information management and information value creation, in trying to sell organizations on the merits of an information governance strategy. He also suggests publicizing early wins to help deliver the message and prove out a governance program’s benefits.

**Not making people accountable.** You can establish all the right rules and procedures for information governance, but none of it matters if you don’t
hold employees accountable when they fail to adhere to the corporate standards. Companies need to establish and enforce consequences if someone neglects to conform to records retention policies, for example, or if business users insist on keeping data local and aren’t following agreed-upon procedures around email inbox limits or data storage. But in doing so, information governance managers do need to have an understanding of how workers use information as part of their jobs. “A big mistake is not caring how people consume information either by being too lax or too restrictive,” said Barry Murphy, an information governance consultant and co-founder of the online publication eDiscovery Journal.

Thinking technology is a panacea. This last one is almost as big a hurdle to successful information governance management as not having the right leadership, according to analysts. They said the mistake here is less about picking the wrong technology and more about thinking that technology alone will solve the governance problem without requiring an organization to think through the required processes. “I have clients with millions of dollars of software licenses sitting on the shelf because they mistook the starting line for the finish line,” Blair said. “They thought buying the enterprise content management system or whatever was the task, but the reality is they expended all that energy and political capital and budget, and now the heavy lifting really begins.”

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