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Information governance strategy: Developing a roadmap and structure for improving corporate information management

Information governance can help organizations better manage and control both structured and unstructured data, potentially helping them to reduce IT costs and improve their regulatory compliance and risk management processes. But implementing an information governance program is a complicated undertaking that poses a variety of challenges and issues to consider. In this eBook, readers will get practical advice on developing an information governance strategy, including a checklist of what to do – and what not to do – as part of a successful information governance initiative. The eBook also provides tips on creating and managing an information governance council and guidance on incorporating internally generated social media data into governance efforts.

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Understanding and implementing information governance best practices

By Beth Stackpole, SearchContentManagement.com Contributor

Despite years of effort and substantial investments in technology and training, most companies still have relatively immature practices for governing the structured data stored in corporate databases and data warehouses, according to industry analysts. But when you consider the burgeoning data stores of unstructured content throughout the typical enterprise – containing everything from emails to documents to files stored in SharePoint collaborative workspaces – the discipline of information governance isn't just immature. It can be downright chaotic.

"When it comes to broader information, particularly unstructured data – in the real world, we're talking about mountains of stuff in shared drives, on hard disks, on floppy disks, even in paper [files]. It's just a complete mess," said Alan Pelz-Sharpe, a principal analyst at Real Story Group, an Olney, Md.-based consulting firm that focuses on content management technologies. "There's a need to bring some sort of order to the chaos, but the kind of governance practices and structures that work for data warehouses simply don't work outside of that paradigm."

Pelz-Sharpe noted that while data governance programs focused on structured data often include automated controls driven by applications, there is no such correlation for information governance efforts, which typically depend on business users to ensure that unstructured data meets corporate guidelines for validity and accessibility by others.

Many companies embark on information governance initiatives to mitigate regulatory compliance risks. Another key driver that gets less attention is information governance as a means of leveraging unstructured data as a core business asset to drive competitive advantages. To successfully achieve the latter goal, however, organizations need a clear picture of the business outcome they're trying to achieve, Pelz-Sharpe and other consultants said. That definition, they added, should be the starting point for building a successful information governance program.

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"There is no automatic declaration you can make that managing information better is good for the enterprise," said Ann Lapkin, vice president of research for information management at Gartner Inc. "If you don't have a clear vision, you don't know what you're going to do, you don't know what information to concentrate on, you don't know what you're looking for in information. You actually don't know anything."

And that's only the beginning. Once the vision and business case for information governance are defined and understood, the heavy lifting starts. Consultants suggested following these basic information governance best practices to ensure that a governance program not only gets off the ground but has staying power:

Set clear governance roles and responsibilities. As part of the foundational steps of formalizing an information governance program, document how different people within an organization will interact with content and set their governance responsibilities accordingly. For example, Forrester Research Inc. analyst Alan Weintraub said that business managers might be designated as "content owners" – the onus is on them to guarantee the integrity and business value of unstructured information. Meanwhile, other employees would be responsible for creating, reviewing or approving documents and other specific pieces of content. All of those responsibilities need to be clearly spelled out and communicated to business users, Weintraub said.

Create policies and procedures to support the program. Along with establishing well-defined roles, organizations need to put specific guidelines in place that help users do their part in maintaining proper information governance practices. Procedures covering how to approve content, change content taxonomies and add new content types are just a hint of what should be covered during this stage of a governance program. Creating a records retention schedule and some sort of hierarchical classification that helps categorize and prioritize unstructured information, including how long it should be kept in systems, is another key step. "It's assumed that just by having policies, an organization knows what makes something an important information asset," said Barry Murphy, an information governance consultant and co-founder of the online publication eDiscovery Journal. But typically, that isn't the case, he added.

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Appoint the proper leadership. A successful information governance program needs a proper leader – and we're not talking about a mere figurehead but an executive at a high enough level who has real authority to make decisions, not just facilitate discussions. Some consultants think the ideal candidate is the CIO or another C-level executive. But in any case, most said that information governance isn't a grassroots endeavor – it needs to be a top-down directive with hands-on executive support.

Establish clear metrics and communicate the value of good governance. This goes back to the old saying that you can't manage unless you measure. The same holds true with information governance, according to Gartner analyst Ted Friedman. "Organizations have to develop data quality metrics and scorecards, and they have to have a repeatable approach for measuring the degree to which data conforms to their policies," he explained. "And they need to make the results visible to people so they can take action." For example, if individual users aren't complying with information governance rules, that should be detected and communicated to them so they can be sure that they do follow proper protocols.

Make information governance a continuous process. Like so many IT initiatives, particularly those involving data management, information governance is not a one-time deal. Companies have to put a framework in place to ensure that their programs are continually monitored and that approved information governance best practices are updated as needed. "It has to be continuous and you have to train users on it," Murphy said. "You don't put something out on your intranet and say, 'Here are the policies around information governance.'"

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Avoiding the common pitfalls of information governance management

By Beth Stackpole, SearchContentManagement.com Contributor

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 them 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 because it's the keeper of the systems that house the data. And while some CIOs 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 grassroots 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."

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Beyond not making information governance programs a high-profile corporate priority, there are a variety of other errors that can trip companies up. 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. A 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 and enforcing an information governance program 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 to one that embraces information sharing and governance as a collective cause. "Socialization and getting agreement across areas – that might just be 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 information governance. 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

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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 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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Tips and advice on making an information governance council work

By Beth Stackpole, SearchContentManagement.com Contributor

One of the most common practices for establishing and enforcing information governance policies and procedures is to set up a dedicated governance council. But analysts caution that without the proper leadership and decision-making authority, a council on its own is no panacea for information governance efforts.

The trouble with many information governance councils, as with any standards-making body, is that too often there is no one individual responsible for steering the ship. As a result, while there might be copious amounts of discussion on governance issues among council members, there is no real power in terms of creating policies and ensuring that they're implemented.

"I'm very cynical about information governance councils – oftentimes, it's yet another round of busy-work that evades the real problem," said Barclay Blair, president and founder of ViaLumina Group, an information governance consulting and professional services firm. "If there is no effort in a serious way to delegate authority, money and responsibility to a single executive, those councils will be empty vessels."

There are other potential missteps to be aware of with information governance councils. For example, many companies try to centralize too much around a council and impede the ability of business units to make their own governance decisions, according to Alan Weintraub, a principal analyst at Forrester Research Inc.

In another scenario cited by Weintraub, the IT representatives on a governance council try to exert too much control over the program, which can shut out members from the business side from providing input or actively participating in the governance efforts. Finally, Weintraub has seen governance boards set out with an aggressive agenda but get sidetracked over time. "Oftentimes, these things will start off like gangbusters, but then if they don't see the value, members will lose interest, they'll stop meeting and eventually lose control over what's going on," he said.

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That's not to say there isn't a place for information governance councils, or benefits to be gained if they're orchestrated with an eye toward avoiding some of those issues. The first order of business, analysts said, should be finding an executive sponsor to lead a council – ideally someone who is a key member of a company's senior leadership team. Among the key duties that the executive sponsor should oversee: Obtaining the budget needed to fund an information governance program, acting as a liaison between the council, business units and top management, and serving as the critical cog in communicating the decisions made by the council to the enterprise as a whole.

All in on an information governance council

In addition, companies should ensure that an information governance council has cross-functional representation across all business units and departments, and not just appoint members from a single area typically associated with information governance – IT or the legal department, for example. Broad representation and participation is critical to ensuring that an information governance program can deliver business value and result in policies and procedures that accurately reflect how unstructured data is used and managed on an enterprise scale, the analysts said.

Also, Weintraub noted that while smaller companies might have a single information governance council, larger entities might be well served by having several boards handling different levels of governance – for example, an umbrella council that tackles strategic issues and an operational board responsible for managing day-to-day governance procedures.

To ensure that information governance boards don't fall into the trap of being all talk and no action, organizations also have to make councils and their members accountable so they take the task seriously. That means giving people the time to focus on information governance by factoring their roles on a council into their job descriptions as well as their performance measurements.

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Developing performance metrics on information governance is critical to moving council members beyond lip service to active participation, said Ted Friedman, an information management analyst at Gartner Inc. "These roles have to have some accountability associated with them," he said, adding that council members can be measured "on things like data quality or degrees of completeness."

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Information governance's next frontier: social media data

By Beth Stackpole, SearchContentManagement.com Contributor

Just as many organizations are trying to get their arms around new strategies and business processes for governing unstructured data, the so-called social Web is flooding them with a torrent of new types of information, making an already difficult discipline all the more complex.

In addition to unstructured content such as email, spreadsheets and documents, companies are now facing an onslaught of social media data, generated both internally and externally: for example, Twitter streams and blog, wiki and Facebook posts. While social media technologies have the potential to foster collaboration and promote sharing well beyond the borders of a traditional enterprise, they also can transcend traditional information controls, making it far more difficult to manage and govern their use.

Perhaps even more vexing to businesses, according to analysts, is the fact that these new data types open the door for potential leaks of sensitive or potentially damaging information, increasing risks in areas such as regulatory compliance, potential litigation and loss of intellectual property (IP).

"Most companies are still struggling to achieve data governance on mainstream data," said David Bowman, an information management architect and independent consultant specializing in data governance. "When you expand into these kinds of unstructured areas, there aren't a lot of best practices out there, and in fact, you are in uncharted waters."

Bowman and other consultants said while companies appear to be well aware of the potential risks surrounding social media, few are anywhere near ready to factor these new information sources into formal information governance programs. Part of what's holding them back is not having well-established policies for managing the information resulting from the use of social networks by employees. A complicating factor is the idea that placing limits around social media usage runs counterintuitive to the premise of the social Web being an open and collaborative forum.

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"The inherent value in Web 2.0 technology is dependent on a certain lack of restriction in its use, allowing people to freely and openly share information on a network," said Barclay Blair, president and founder of ViaLumina Group, a consulting and professional services firm that focuses on information governance. "If you tighten things down and create unreasonable policies, why have the technology in the first place?"

Nevertheless, Blair acknowledges that if companies are leveraging social media platforms as part of their business operations, they must treat the resulting content they would any other information asset. "If you turn a blind eye to non-enterprise technology, you will be held liable for what happens in those environments," he said. "It only makes sense to mitigate that risk."

Information governance and social media data: a balancing act

So, how can organizations avoid the potential risks and follow sound information governance practices without creating onerous restrictions on the use of social networks by business workers? First and foremost, analysts recommend putting together formal communication and training programs that educate users on how and why their social media activities don't just reflect on them personally but also have wider ramifications for the business. In the same vein, companies should provide guidelines, perhaps in the form of amended computer usage policies, on what constitutes acceptable and non-acceptable behavior.

At the end of the day, the analysts said, companies should take their cues from the internal business case for using social networks to determine how far to push information governance oversight – as opposed to just doing governance for its own sake. For example, some cases of social media usage might not be central to business operations and could just add unnecessary tasks to an information governance program.

 "Why bother managing a tweet stream if it's not going to affect business outcomes," noted Anne Lapkin, a vice president of research at Gartner Inc. "You have to put information into a business context, and social media data should be no more or no less than anything else."

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But there's no avoiding the need for governing information from social networks that is material to the business. Lapkin and other analysts said such data must be included in the large melting pot of unstructured information that with proper governance can deliver business value to an organization – and not get it into trouble.

Beth Stackpole is a freelance writer who has been covering the intersection of technology and business for 25-plus years for a variety of trade and business publications and websites.

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