

How a 'digital office' can help you wrestle back control from the data deluge

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The decade-old vision of the paperless office has never, and may never, come to pass. But the developments of the cloud, digital workflow and Electronic Content Management (ECM) have all cut down the amount of paper that the average office deals with.



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According to a report from the non-profit research organisation AIIM, there is a gradual decline in physical documentation in most businesses. In fact, consumption of paper and the number of photocopies is decreasing in 35% of organisations (although it is increasing in 32%), but in the largest enterprises there is a nett decline of 15%.

Similarly, according to a recent report by the IT industry trade association, CompTia, almost 80% of businesses are making efforts to use less paper throughout their offices. Furthermore, one in five is pursuing this goal to a high degree. The research revealed that there are numerous factors driving businesses to move towards a more digital office. These include the need to increase efficiency and improve control of information, but most importantly, to reduce the overall cost of information management for the enterprise.

A key method

Enterprise Content Management is a key method for effectively capturing, managing and accessing all the business' information - regardless of format. As such, it can help businesses use, store and access information better in many forms beyond paper - data streams, electronic files, video and other digital media, web content and email.

With analyst firm IDC estimating that the 'digital universe' is expanding over 40%, to reach 44 zettabytes by 2020, tackling the sheer amount of content in the business can be daunting. Accomplishing this requires two key capabilities in order to

avoid the move become a chaotic mess. The first is the agility to react to changes as they occur within the business and the wider market. The second is the ability to structure the organisation's data and put in place the proper processes and tools to ensure the migration and all subsequent work flows smoothly.

Both of these elements require ECM applications to streamline access to records through keyword- and full-text search allowing employees to get to the information they need directly from their desktops (and mobile devices) in seconds rather than searching multiple applications or digging through paper records.

These systems can reduce storage, paper and mailing needs, make employees more efficient, and result in better, more informed decisions across the enterprise - all of which reduce the overhead costs of managing information. In a business environment dominated by the convergence of the cloud, mobility, analytics and social communication - what IDC refers to as the third platform for innovation and growth - this is vital.

But there are several approaches that can be taken in this regard. The question is what works best. The answer will depend on several factors, including the size of the company concerned and the complexity of the processes involved. However, there are three key elements that every enterprise should consider:

1. **Analyse:** First and foremost is the need to analyse the business and clearly defining the scope and limits of the project. Many digitisation projects fail if they are not properly scoped out both because there is confusion and scope creep, but also because there is no clear identification of what success looks like.
Once the objectives and scope has been determined, the next step is to model the existing and future processes. Business Process Management (BPM) tools can save time and be an effective way of accounting for all the interactions that throughout each process lifecycle and automatically generate workflow and user guides to map these out;
2. **Implementation:** Today, innovative and simple solutions exist that make the digitisation process a lot more seamless, cost effective and straightforward than it might have been in the past.
For instance, automatic character and document recognition, integrated directly into the scanning hardware can automate the entire capture, workflow and indexing process.

Similarly, powerful cloud-based electronic document management (EDM) solutions are readily available to small and large businesses alike. These provide a secure and scalable platform for the handling of all business content, even legally sensitive information.

Finally, for larger customers, where digitisation must be integrated into a larger collaborative workflow system, there are also tailored solutions that easily connect to the company's custom and third-party applications. These solutions can be hosted on either the client or hosted in the cloud;

3. **Deployment:** Once the analysis and planning has been done it's time to deploy the combination of hardware and software that will help digitise the business.
Accomplishing this requires both large- and small-scale equipment throughout the business. The exact quantities and placements will depend on the business' individual needs, but a combination of high-volume centralised processing areas and individual scanners and multifunction printers will ensure that as much of the data within the company is converted from physical to digital.

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In parallel with the hardware deployment, the software roll-out should be underway. This helps to deliver the combination of automation and simplicity with the depth of processing, search, content management and workflows that maximises the value in the digitisation transformation seamlessly.

This deployment model aligns with the rapid and massive convergence underway bringing together mobility, cloud, social media and analytics. At its foundation, Business Process Management, Imaging & Print Management and Enterprise Content Management are also coming together for the greater benefit of business. This brings together the context of the business and devices with the information content of business documents.

Conclusion

Ultimately, paper is the lowest form of value for the information of business content. It is short-lived, static, unsearchable and less secure. On the other hand, digitised documents boost the value of your business information and have many useful lives.

Today's information explosion is threatening to overwhelm the enterprise, and organisations are reaching a point where paper processes alone simply cannot keep up anymore; only digital can.

These three stages should help any business carefully and methodically to plan out the shift of any or all sectors of the business on the evolution towards becoming a digital office.

There is also one vital consideration that must be made at every stage - change management. It is essential that users are involved at all stages and form part of the project. Ultimately, user adoption is not dictated by how powerful or 'cool' the technology is, but rather how happy the employees are to use it. As such, it's important to highlight upcoming changes, reinforce the benefits to the users and listen to their feedback from the beginning.

At the end of the day, it all comes down to these two things, content and context. Whether you're operating an accounting or HR department, student admissions office or patient finance group, documents and other unstructured content fuel the daily business activities that drive your business forward. Lexmark takes that content (in whatever its format) and delivers it instantly in the context of your specific business processes, applications and people.

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