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The information governance imperative

Work has changed. It's time for information governance
to catch up.

Introduction

The world of work has changed profoundly in response to the global pandemic—and it has changed more quickly than anyone would have believed possible. In every industry, companies have embraced a vast range of new collaboration tools and technologies; and with that have harnessed the power of the cloud to enable their people to work together, no matter where they may be. Few expect a complete return to the traditional office.

However, this revolution in how people work has led to significant new challenges for workers and companies alike. The same tools and technologies that enable people to work together so easily are creating a deluge of content that's increasingly impossible to manage effectively—an endless, ever-expanding flood of documents, revisions, comments, messages, presentations, recordings, spreadsheets, and other data. Many workers struggle to know where to look for the information they need, and even once they find what they are looking for, it may not be the current version. Productivity—and decision-making- could potentially suffer.

These challenges are arising because organizations' information governance hasn't kept pace with the incredibly rapid changes in how people work, collaborate, share, and store information. But there's no going back: work has changed. And it's time companies rebuilt their information governance to reflect this new reality.

Information governance in brief

The term 'information governance' describes an enterprise-wide accountability framework designed to ensure that organizations and their employees create, store, use, archive, and delete information—whether structured data or unstructured 'content'—appropriately and correctly. This framework underpins an organization's information management initiatives. It influences the tools and technologies used, shapes the workplace culture around collaboration and information management, and assigns responsibility for ensuring information is properly defined and managed. Ultimately, information governance provides a structure that facilitates timely business decision-making that is based on accurate, up-to-date information.

The key objectives for any information governance framework are to:

- Drive enterprise value through the proper organization of information.
- Define and implement effective information management controls.
- Maximize the efficiency of information management processes wherever possible, typically through the use of automation.

An information governance framework will include clear processes for:

- Managing the organization's taxonomy (its clearly defined data and metadata standards).
- Assigning information governance 'owners'.
- Managing information governance policies and procedures.
- Defining and tracking relevant metrics.
- Evaluating and prioritizing new projects or initiatives.
- Identifying, escalating, and resolving issues.
- Promoting awareness of information governance overall.

While the day-to-day impact of proper information governance may not always be immediately apparent, its value is indisputable. Information governance enables organizations to:

- Maximize the value of their information and minimize friction, risks, and costs.
- Ensure consistency, boost productivity, reduce confusion, and improve insights.
- Reduce the number of tools and technologies they rely on.
- Automate processes wherever possible.
- Use the right kind of storage repositories for different kinds of content, improving quality, version control, and security.

Moreover, effective information governance delivers a meaningful return on investment, in multiple forms:

- Incremental revenue can be generated through more efficient, profitable use of information.
- 'Hard' costs can be reduced by streamlining technology and storage needs.
- 'Soft' costs can be trimmed by enabling employees to find and use information more easily and quickly than ever, saving a great deal of time.
- Compliance, legal, and other costs can be avoided or minimized because information is properly managed, recorded, stored, and disposed of.

When information governance isn't working, organizations could potentially

The rapid shift in how, where, and when we work—along with the introduction of a plethora of new tools and technologies facilitating this shift—has only exacerbated organizations' ongoing information governance challenges. Despite years of effort and investment, organizations find that information management is still a source of many pain points. These include:

- **Poor data quality** arising from a lack of common data standards, undefined yet complex intra-business relationships, and 'hidden' data issues.
- **Slow execution** owing to a lack of end-to-end business connectivity between key systems and incomplete or incorrect information that requires unnecessary manual intervention to 'clean up' or clarify.
- **Significant manual effort** is still required to source needed but missing data and get it into a usable format.
- **Unenforced or ignored information governance policies** because existing governance structures and processes are either ineffective or poorly communicated.
- **Overstretched staff** as employees spend more time than they should 'fixing the data' so it meets their needs and enables them to complete their work.
- **Poor collaboration** as departments grow increasingly 'siloed,' creating and modifying information in ways that suit their needs without regard to the needs of other groups or intra-organization consistency.
- **Suboptimal information access control and security** as organizations fail to implement or enforce data access rules. This can be a significant oversight, since many collaboration tools aren't set up in a way to prevent improper information sharing.
- **Remote work-related challenges** as employees (and external parties) create, store, and share information and documents in different—and multiple—channels, using email, sending chat messages, spending their day on video conferencing, sharing files with a file sharing tool, or using collaboration platforms (such as Slack or Microsoft Teams). Finding what you need can become time-consuming detective work.
- **Unnecessary duplication** of effort and content, as users who can't readily find the information often opt to recreate it instead.
- **Undefined and unmitigated risks** as organizations operate without clear, consistent, easily accessed information.

These pain points often arise when organizations fail to develop, implement, and enforce an information governance framework that reflect the way work is being done today. As a result, information is managed in a disconnected, haphazard way across the enterprise, hampering efforts to coordinate, standardize, and automate the flow of information. Decision makers knowingly—or worse, unknowingly—find themselves relying on potentially incomplete or incorrect data, which can compromise their ability to lead the organization forward.

To potentially eliminate these pain points, organizations should consider investing in improving their information governance. They need to assign clear responsibility for information throughout the 'information lifecycle'—from the data needed for a business process to the end result of that process. At every stage of the business process, data elements must be defined, taxonomies and information standardized, and collaboration tools and technologies set up and deployed appropriately. Employees must be trained in how to manage the flow of information throughout the process, and then incentivized and monitored for repetitive, successful execution.

Implementing information governance: Where to begin

With the world of work changing so quickly in such a short span of time, it's never been more important for organizations to consider investing in establishing an effective information governance framework—or improving an existing framework to meet the demands of today's workplace. But where to begin?

Put people and structure first

Organizations often jump at the opportunity to throw more technology at their information management challenges, but this tends to compound the problems they face. Instead, organizations should focus on the people that will be involved with and impacted by the information governance framework.

- **Appoint the right leader.** Selecting the right leader for the information governance effort is critical. Information governance, executed well, permeates the entire organization and can change long-entrenched ways of working. Implementing or changing a governance framework needs to be driven by someone respected by the organization, someone who can be trusted to seek input from across the enterprise and execute the journey in a thoughtful, respectful way.
- **Identify the right governance model.** There are several models that organizations can use for information governance: centralized, decentralized, or a federated/hybrid model that combines elements of the first two. Leadership must choose the model (or combination of models) that is right for the organization, in consultation with those groups that are likely to be affected by the choice.
- **Invest in change management.** A new or improved information governance framework changes how people work and collaborate. It's essential that organizations invest in a robust, proactive program of change management to ensure the effort succeeds. Organizations need to explain why the governance framework is needed, the new policies and requirements involved, how it will change work—and how it will make work better for everyone. It's also vital to provide the training required to enable employees across the enterprise deliver what's expected—and reap the rewards of the new approach to governance.

Once the appropriate governance model(s) is selected and change management planning is underway, the leader must ensure that the teams required by the governance model are staffed—and empowered to deliver what's expected. Within each team, roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes must be defined, agreed to, and communicated.

Next, focus on key policies and processes

The leader, in collaboration with the governance teams, should then review information management policies and processes that require attention. Processes, and the flow of information through those processes, should be examined and mapped. Standards and the level of records management required should be defined. Work and tasks should be assigned. Privacy, security, and compliance requirements should be identified, articulated, and incorporated.

Policies and processes should be prioritized based on their overall impact on the organization, the relative effort required, and input from teams and individuals within the organization as appropriate. Wherever possible, the organization should look for quick wins that not only deliver meaningful improvements to information management, but help persuade others across the business about the value of information governance and the need for it to succeed.

Use the right technology and automate as much as possible

Once the governance model is in place and staffed, and relevant policies and processes are understood and updated as required, the organization should turn its attention to the technology it will use to automate the management, sharing, and storage of the information going forward. It's critical to have the right technology in place—tools that align with and support the organization's information governance framework from the outset.

These tools and technologies should be used to automate information governance as much as possible. Automation can reduce the need for manual work, obviously, but it also makes information governance simply easier across the enterprise—ensuring information is handled correctly at every stage of a business process, from the initial 'trigger point' to logging and storing documents and records appropriate at the end. Automation helps ensure that standards are applied correctly, policies are

conformed with, the required data is entered, the appropriate individuals or teams are notified at the right time, and the information is stored in the right repositories.

In some cases, organizations may need to invest in new tools or technologies in order to execute their information governance framework effectively. But many organizations aren't maximizing the features and capabilities of their existing tools and technologies, either. Reconfiguring current systems, activating unused features, or adding a module that provides a specific functionality can significantly improve their effectiveness from a governance standpoint. Of course, it's important the users of those tools and technologies be provided with appropriate training targeted at the specific tasks of their job and an understanding of how others need the information they manage.

Consider these simple examples that can be automated with common tools:

- When the places users store their content grows, the 'copies' of the content multiply.
  CONSIDER: Setting governing policies for each repository. Then clearly communicate that each location, especially those that can contain "copies," will be purged regularly. Follow through with automated purging on a regular basis per that policy. Ensure users are also aware of how they can store content that must retained long term. The policy should clearly identify how and where users can store content they are required to keep, but still must follow retention rules and legal hold requirements.
- When users create folders used by their teams and departments on the fly, this promotes content sprawl that is disorganized, unlikely to be easily found by others, and/or contain the right security.
  CONSIDER: Setting up a more systematic way of organizing content around predictable business transactions or an organized filing plan should be put into place. This can be done by automating the provisioning of team folders which are triggered by process-driven business events. This can help ensure each workspace is formatted per the organization's taxonomy, uses approved drop down lists for proper tagging, and applies security rules in each folder. In such a scenario records can be more easily identified, and retention automatically applied. The teams will get used to the organization's standard filing formats, appreciate the significantly approved findability of the content/records, and automatic ways content security is applied. If ad hoc teams are absolutely required, ensure they are treated as temporary locations that are purged on a regular basis.

As regulators require organizations to take a more proactive approach to managing their business records, properly manage sensitive information, keep certain information for a "regulated' periods of time, and/or ensure that certain information is 'fully deleted', manual management of that information becomes less and less possible – especially within the time frames set by law. CONSIDER: Active monitoring of compliance is nearly impossible without automation. Therefore, automate wherever possible everywhere content flows. That would include documents shared via email, teams' folders, and file sharing systems. To begin, organizations should think broadly and use the features they have, such as reports on older, unused content, or flag content containing certain terms. Over time, simple automation can be replaced with more sophisticated automation tools.

Choosing the right information governance model for your organization

An effective governance model ensures information governance is delivered effectively across the organization. It sets out clear roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities; provides services and takes actions as needed; promotes effective, efficient information management; and measures results and drives continuous improvement. Whichever form it takes—centralized, decentralized, or federated/hybrid, an effective governance model should be scalable, flexible, and inclusive, and drive enterprise-wide consistency.

Organizations should select the model—or combination of models—that best reflects their structure and way of working. How to business processes flow? Where is information created and consumed? Larger organizations may find different approaches are needed for different parts of the business: HR and Finance may benefit from a more centralized model, while the company's sprawling production division may need a more hybrid or decentralized model.

Overcoming key challenges to effective information governance

Implementing a new or improved information governance framework can be challenging—from getting started to managing expectations and persuading people to change the way they're working. However, in our experience, some of the more likely challenges can be anticipated and overcome.

Eliminate the temptation to manage information manually

Organizations sometimes try to apply information governance manually, rather than putting the right tools in place. This could result in repetitive, time-consuming work and a heightened risk of errors—potential mistakes that can have serious downstream impact and erode trust in the information and governance process. Eliminate the temptation to stick with manual processes by automating as much information work as possible. Build templates that insist that required fields be filled. Provide drop-down lists of acceptable data values. Auto-apply important metadata that aligns with approved taxonomies. And that's just the start. Automating such basic tasks can cut down on manual work, reduce the likelihood of errors, and build trust in the governance process overall.

Overcome adoption reluctance by explaining the value of information

Resistance to change is nothing new, and organizations can expect teams and workers to respond to new information management practices with a skeptical eye. All too often, organizations introduce new processes without explaining the rationale for the changes—and are later baffled about why people haven't adopted the new ways of working. Moreover, information governance requires people to think about the needs of other teams and the enterprise overall—not just their own, or their team's. That can be a big cultural shift for some organizations.

Well-planned change management can help overcome this reluctance and smooth the road to adoption and cultural change. Communicate what's changing—and more importantly, why—well ahead of the implementation. Build understanding and enthusiasm for the new approaches and recognize and reward successful transitions to new practices. Provide training, and help people understand how the new approach to managing information benefits them.

Make sure information governance and performance management align

Organizations' performance management processes typically focus on achieving individual, team, or departmental goals, rather than activity that's for the greater good of the enterprise. If performance management doesn't provide incentives for supporting fully aligned information management behaviours, employees may resist following the mandated processes and best practices. One way that could help overcome this, organizations should make sure that they look at how to adjust performance metrics to encourage departments, teams, and individual employees to manage information appropriately and in ways that benefit the entire enterprise.

Manage leadership's expectations to help avoid frustration

Leaders like to see results—fast. Unfortunately, it takes time for information governance to demonstrate its impact and value to the business. If C-suite pressure grows too intense, organizations may not take the time needed to establish the solid foundation for good information management habits. That will likely result in frustration and less than optimal results down the road.

Those responsible for implementing a new or improved information governance program need to manage senior management expectations throughout the process. Don't be swayed by demands for immediate impact. Craft a realistic plan that allows for governance foundations to be built, learning curves to be scaled, and new information management habits and practices to be learned, internalized, and adopted. Communicate the plan and the time frames, and keep senior management apprised of the program's progress and successes at every stage.

Work has changed. It's time for information governance to catch up

The time has come for organizations to upgrade their approach to information governance to reflect the realities of today's work environment. But to reap the rewards of information governance, organizations must move deliberately and carefully. They must put the right people in charge of the effort, choose the right governance model(s) for their business, select the right mix of tools and technologies that align with what the business needs, and—crucially—invest in a program of change management to build understanding and trust among the workforce and encourage adoption.

Done effectively, information governance can eliminate friction throughout the enterprise, improve decision-making, reduce costs, and deliver real, meaningful value. Taking action on information governance today builds a strong foundation for any organization's future.

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