

Implementing An Information Management Software Solution

The first steps in implementing any information management software solution are having:

1. An understanding of the objectives and
2. A realistic level of commitment from management.

It's impossible for me to tell you the number of times we have spoken to companies that have records management problems that they wish to solve, but are not prepared to commit adequate resources to resolve the difficulties. They express a strong interest in establishing a records management program, but have no reasonable degree of dedication to putting the procedures and controls in place to make a program work.

A classic example of this is a law firm or similar organization that has a centralized file room where documents are stored. They call and complain that they are constantly losing files and are spending hours locating and re-creating these lost documents. These conversations typically go something like this ... "Hello Mr. Hyman, we understand that your company developed and markets a records management software. We are very interested in implementing a software like yours."

We demo our software and the company representatives love it, but they do not want to dedicate anyone to manage the implementation, the files or the software. They just want the file room and software to run themselves. We explain to them that someone must take responsibility for the program, but they feel that the software should operate without human intervention. Unfortunately we cannot help them. Someone must take ownership of the records and the records management program. These companies think they cannot afford to dedicate even a portion of a person's time to the project. What they do not understand is that they are spending significantly more money locating and/or reproducing lost files and documents. In addition, they are making their high paid professionals less efficient and, of course this costs additional "soft dollars" as well. Not to mention that they may at some point be setting the stage for a potential malpractice claim. Think of it this way; if an important document or file is lost, the professional may not be aware that it is missing and may not take the contents of the lost information into consideration when making a decision or recommendation.

Next, it is important to understand that a company must set realistic goals. Do not try to implement a software solution that is much more advanced than your company can manage (or needs). Identify and rank your goals in order of importance.

Here's a real life example that demonstrates this point. About six years ago, one of our commercial records centers introduced us to a potential client, a police department. Representatives from the commercial records center and I met with the records manager. She explained that they had no real system for managing files. They were constantly losing, searching and recreating files.

At times the Judges, Prosecutors and Police Officers would get very upset with the records management department. After hearing her problems, I laid out a very systematic approach for implementing an economical bar code file tracking solution. The solution would cost approximately \$10,000. When I finished my presentation, she indicated that my proposal sounded great, but she thought digital imaging was the wave of the future and she wanted to implement a digital imaging solution. I explained to her, that based on the number of files she managed, the cost of implementing digital imaging would likely approach at least \$1 million. No matter what I said the records manager was convinced that she needed digital imaging. I indicated to her that she could implement the bar coding as Phase I of an implementation, and that she could pursue digital imaging as part of a Phase II implementation. After all, I reasoned, we could have the bar code program up and functioning in 30 days. Once we could demonstrate the success of the Phase I implementation, the digital imaging might be easier to promote to her superiors. Unfortunately, she thought imaging was the only way to go and there was absolutely nothing anyone could say to dissuade her from her conclusion. Of course, the police department did not have the budget for the digital imaging program and as a result, she implemented no computerized records management program at all.

The point of this story is quite simple. You must set realistic goals that can be accomplished in a sensible way. You need short term goals as well as long term objectives. Had the woman implemented our bar code program, she would presently be in a position to migrate into imaging now that the costs have diminished significantly. In short, you must be practical and your goals must be achievable. Be prepared to implement your program in stages. Address the immediate needs first. Do not try and implement a solution that has too many components as part of a one-phase approach. On the other hand, you should plan for the future. You want to implement a solution that can grow with your organization's needs, but do not forget the here and now. After all, it is easier to convince management to fix existing, real, everyday problems.

Here is a list of a few things to look for in your software:

1. The software should be easy to use. Have the software company demo the software for you. As discussed above, define your objectives. Have a list of questions ready. Have the company take you through the steps you will follow in the software to meet each objective.
2. One of the biggest issues for most corporations is: How do I get information about the records that are tracked into the software? Is the methodology automated? If data entry is required, is it efficient? How many customizable fields of information can I track? How many levels deep can I index? Some systems only support boxes and files. Others support only three levels. Still others, like us, support an unlimited number of levels.
3. The software should be fully bar code enabled. Most tracking software systems utilize bar code technology to track the movement of physical files. Can you print bar codes from the software? If so, can you configure the label formats to match your needs? How flexible are the bar code features? If you already have bar codes on your documents, can

the new system utilize the existing bar codes? Make sure the program has a method of validating that valid bar codes are scanned in a proper sequence.

4. Does the program support space management? If you are storing records boxes in a warehouse, you will want space management functionality. This will allow you to determine how much space you have available and where in the warehouse it is located.
5. Does the program support digital images? If so, how and what types? Even if digital imaging is not in your immediate plans, it will likely be a consideration in the not too distant future. It is nice to have this option available in your software. Also can the program track other types of electronic documents?
6. Does the program have support for the Web? This may or may not be an issue depending on your needs. Most likely if not presently, in the future you will want Web functionality.
7. What type of technical support does the company offer? Are software upgrades free with support? It is important to know how many programmers and technical support representatives sustain the program. How long has the company been in the information management software business?

One of the biggest mistakes we have seen many companies make is not understanding enough about the software development company that maintains and supports the software. I speak to companies all the time that have purchased software from a vendor that is a one, two or three person firm. They almost always have complaints about the reliability of service. At the time firms of this size get approximately 20 customers their resources become stretched and they no longer have the necessary resources to develop the next generation of software.

It is important to know that approximately every five (5) years a software development firm must totally rewrite their software to stay current with the newest development platforms. Very small firms just cannot support these expenses. Another common mistake we have observed is that people think they can write their own custom software solutions. People who follow this path are generally under the mistaken belief that they have more control over the final product. At least 95% of the time this does not work out satisfactorily. There is no way you can afford to write a custom software solution for records management in an economical way. Your vision coming to reality is a long shot. Significant cost overruns are inevitable. Even the most experienced computer system design analysis expects these outcomes and plans accordingly. You must understand that if your objectives are not met, there is, in reality, very little you can do about it. If you contract out the development, the cost of enforcing a custom software agreement is, in most cases, significantly more than the cost of development. It will take years to resolve in the courts and many aspects of any custom software development project are subjective. Long-term support is another major issue for custom software solutions.

Be sure to understand the software licensing. Many software vendors have moved to an annual license fee. In the case of an annual license fee, your software ceases to operate each year if you do not pay a fee. Other software companies, like us, still offer a perpetual license agreement. In the case of a perpetual license you do not have to pay fees each year to keep your software functioning. Do not be deceived into believing that executing an annual license agreement is the same as paying support. You may get free upgrades in both cases, but in the case of support it is optional and can be canceled at anytime without impacting your ability to use your software.

These are only a very few of the issues you need to consider when purchasing information management software. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or comments. You may e-mail me at shyman@dhsworldwide.com.

Side bar

About Steven J. Hyman and DHS Worldwide

Steven J. Hyman is president of DHS Worldwide, a software development firm specializing in information management solutions. He has a degree in Computer Science and Business Administration from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee and he graduated with honors from the University of Miami School of Law. He has been actively involved in records management for over a decade and has written numerous articles about the industry. In addition, he has spoken at many conventions sponsored by records management organizations and has served on several committees that are connected to national records management associations. DHS Worldwide markets three different editions of its Total Recall™ Records Management Software, which include solutions designed for both the corporate and commercial records management companies. The Total Recall products are distributed and supported worldwide. For more information, please visit www.dhsworldwide.com or call (800) 377-8406.