

Do You Have the Right Stuff to Transition to Information Governance?



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In the late 1950s, the United States invited its top test pilots to apply to become the nation's first astronauts. As memorialized in the book *The Right Stuff*, test pilots then had to decide whether to transition into an uncertain-yet-vaguely-familiar new career or continue along their present path. Some made the move and became famous; others didn't, and many of them faded into history.

If you are in the records space today, then you are standing at a similar crossroads. Whereas the pilots of yesteryear had to decide whether to take their aviation skills and adapt them to space flight, you must choose whether to adapt and expand your records disciplines and apply them to all of your organization's information – regardless of its data type, format, delivery medium, department, or location.

Follow this trajectory and you'll push the envelope toward information governance (IG) and position yourself as a Very Important Person in your enterprise. Don't, and you'll likely spend your days in an informational silo that's shown in a corner of the organizational chart.

The Disciplines, They Ain't A-Changin'

In my stuffier moments, I define IG as being “the application of formal and informal controls to ensure information is managed according to your organization's legal, operational, and technical requirements.”[1]

Hmmm ... sounds a lot like records management, doesn't it? That's no coincidence because the tenets of records management are encompassed within IG (along with legal, privacy, risk/compliance, security, technology, etc.). When you come right down to it, what we're trying to do is:

- Find information when you need it,
- Leverage it and protect it, and
- Secure and assure it . . .

. . . all of which require the same disciplines we utilize when managing our

[1]For completeness, here is ARMA's official definition: Information governance is the overarching and coordinating strategy for all organizational information. It establishes the authorities, supports, processes, capabilities, structures, and infrastructure to enable information to be a useful asset and reduced liability to an organization, based on that organization's specific business requirements and risk tolerance. – ARMA Guide to the Information Profession

records. The task before us now is to apply these to all of the rest of our information.

Here's how one organization pulled this off.

A Real-World Example

A client of mine in the construction industry recognized that its enterprise resource planning (ERP) system was in dire need of replacement. But rather than rush to swap out the old solution in favor of a new one, the company took the time to trace which of its numerous other systems intersected with ERP, and then added information interoperability to its list of critical buying criteria. This meant that many core records precepts suddenly loomed enormously large (and, not coincidentally, took several vendors right out of the running). Chief among these are the need to:

- Control, protect, track, audit, archive, and dispose of every bit of information according to policy
- Manage and apply taxonomy and metadata to facilitate universal search/find
- Reconcile vocabularies so those controls could encompass the whole organization
- Install operational standardization and propagate a culture of accountability to ensure full internal compliance
- Commit heavily to security, privacy, and quality to promote the treatment of information as being as vital to organizational performance as its other assets (people, money, infrastructure, etc.)

The final item on this list may be the least familiar to many, and in some ways serves as the gateway from records to IG. But, conceptually, it's unlikely to be

news to anyone. The trick is getting the rest of your organization to buy into it – something else that’s unlikely to strike you as news.

Information is Both Omnipresent and Invisible

Truth is, most organizations take a long time to figure out what this client figured out: that most of the up-front energy has to be spent on your information, not your information technology. My client could have simply installed a new ERP system and addressed the immediate need. But by engaging the proper forethought, it avoided significant expenditures of time, money, and energy to link its silos.

Central to this effort was understanding the makeup, flow, protection, and quality of the client’s information – elements that are central to good records practices and to the selection and use of effective records technology. If my primary contact had been a records person, this thought process would have flowed easily. But she wasn’t, and watching her climb the learning curve made clear to me just how well positioned records folks are to play this role right now, today.

Underlying my client’s struggle is one simple fact of business life: people use information every day, and yet don’t give it a second thought. Ironically, it is its very pervasiveness that makes us see information much the way a fish sees water. But this “invisibility” doesn’t make it any less vital, and taking it for granted can be dangerous because of how vulnerable we are to issues affecting access, accuracy, and business continuity.

Requires Support from Higher Up and Lower Down

Boosting information’s visibility requires getting people both up and down the organizational chart to get behind your initiative in a meaningful way. For those

higher up, you must find a way to have them make public, forceful, and continual statements that inform everyone the days of disorderly shared foldering, casual filesharing, ad hoc retention, etc., are over. Prompting this kind of open support can be difficult, so be prepared to develop a savvy combination of fiscal analyses (e.g., savings in time and costs vs. investment required) and business risk assessments (e.g., avoidance of litigation or fines for non-compliance) to get it done.

It's also important that you recruit those lower down on the chart to your cause. One proven route to achieving this objective is to approach every department that relies on information to get its work done – which is to say, every department – as you transition from records to IG. Because most people haven't thought about things in the way you now are, their various perspectives must be solicited as you move ahead. Otherwise, you risk leaving them feeling you're doing this "to them" and not "for them."

Best practice is to establish a cross-departmental steering committee that will develop the new modes of operation and enforce their adoption. Typical topics of discussion at this level include information security, ownership, and usage. Assuming you've been able to solicit the higher-level support you need, it's vital to develop procedures for making clear to everyone in the organization why treating information as a valuable business asset is a good thing – and what the consequences are of not doing so.

Veterans of the records management wars will recognize these techniques because the dynamics at work in IG are very much the same as those in records management. If there's a difference, it's a cultural one in that "records" are often perceived as involving an unwanted compliance chore while "governance" can be positioned as an investment in business value. Day to day, the difference is small, but strategically it is career-critical. And we are, right now, at the point of transition.

3...2...1...

As you count down to your launch into IG, it's important to remember these two things:

1. The medium on which information resides (i.e., in hard-copy or electronic form) does not determine that information's organizational value. The hard work is to cultivate a culture in which the distinction between the formats disappears, and that the focus is placed and maintained on the information itself, not its medium. This way you can put together a complete picture of what you're dealing with, rather than individual pieces.
2. Your databases, document repositories, and, yes, human beings all contain business-critical information and must be part of the IG equation. The technologies you need to execute the vision certainly do differ, but care must be taken to ensure each one aligns with your fundamental objectives.

After 20+ years of consulting on this stuff, I find it clear that this kind of holism is both necessary and inevitable to information success. But it's hard to propagate in the siloed environments that have become entrenched over the decades.

The good news is that many of the people in these environments are beginning to move toward you because you're already familiar with the issues they're dealing with. They usually don't know they're heading in your direction – in one client case, no one outside the records department even knew the department existed! – but they are being forced to develop what we think of as records management skills because of their need to control access to their information, retrieve it quickly, ensure its quality, and protect it from interlopers.

And these are things you've made a career out of doing.