

Accelerating out of the Recession:

New Approaches to Executing RIM Program Strategies

The volume, velocity, variety, and value of information assets organizations are creating and receiving provide a platform for information governance professionals to step up to a more strategic leadership role.

Bruce W. Dearstyne, Ph.D.

The recession is ending, the economy is recovering, and enterprises are bouncing back. The future looks promising – particularly for records and information management (RIM) program leaders who are willing to try nontraditional approaches to meeting the challenges posed by the current “disruptive” forces in information management.

Challenges of the Disruptive, Digital Age

In “Top 10 Technology Trends Impacting Information Infrastructure, 2013,” Gartner Inc. describes several of these disruptive forces, including big data, an expanding information infrastructure, and new strategies for assigning value or risk to information assets.

The report stresses there are big opportunities and risks going forward: “Significant innovation continues in the field of information management (IM) technologies and practices driven by the volume, velocity and variety of information, and the huge amount of value – and potential liability – locked inside all this



ungoverned and underused information.”

Additionally, the report emphasizes that “practically all information assets must be available for delivery through varied, multiple, concurrent and, in a growing number of instances, real-time channels and mobile devices.” Because of these ongoing “disruptions,” it’s more important than ever to be able to share and repurpose information for “multiple context delivery and use cases,” the report suggests.

Taking non-traditional ap-

proaches to the seven traditional strategies described below will help RIM programs adapt to, and shape, this complicated future.

Taking non-traditional approaches to the seven traditional strategies described below will help RIM programs adapt to, and shape, this complicated future.

proaches to the seven traditional strategies described below will help RIM programs adapt to, and shape, this complicated future.

1. *Apply a High-Visibility, Decisive Leadership Style.*

Until recently, many leadership authorities encouraged a deliberate, extensively consultative style. The leader, they proclaimed, needed to build consensus and be sure all issues were resolved, resources aligned, and stakeholders fully supportive before taking action.

Newer literature, more attuned to the fast-changing, post-recession world, advises less consultation and deliberation and more accelerated decision-making, even when the evidence is incomplete or ambiguous. In fact, the more innovative the program, the less likely it is to have incontrovertible evidence before deciding whether to change course.

“Eat the uncertainty,” advises Liz Mellon in *Inside the Leader’s Mind*, and beware of “the spurious comfort

that data can provide.” According to Mellon, the leader has no safety net and needs to know when to take risks, make tough decisions, ensure implementation, and assume responsibility if things go wrong. Being quicker and more fluid in making decisions will pay off. “Whereas some dither, you move to action,” she writes.

2. *Build Resilience into Programs.*

The recession has also provided insights through experience about cushioning against and bounce-

ing back from adversity and unanticipated events. In the book *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back*, authors Andrew Zolli and Ann Marie Healy define resilience as “the capacity of a system, enterprise, or a person to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances.”

Resilience varies from program to program, but resilient enterprises have these traits:

- They proactively monitor their environments, seek out potentially disturbing information, identify potential disruptions, and look for early warning signals that the program may not be meeting stakeholder expectations.
- They build in flexibility and safeguards against disruption, such as redundant systems, full staffing levels, robust IT systems, and backup capacity for storing records.
- They promote a culture of shared purpose and values that focuses

on the impact of the program and its services, and they build pride that can help sustain the program in hard times.

- They foster a culture of experimentation and innovation that predisposes people toward trying new things in hard times.
- They practice what *Resilience* calls “adhocracy,” which is characterized by “informal team roles, limited focus on standard operating procedures, deep improvisation, rapid cycles, selective decentralization, the empowerment of special teams, and a general intolerance of bureaucracy.”
- They prepare staff members for difficult times by providing training that encourages people to imagine possibilities, display inventiveness in problem solving, and develop alternatives when traditional approaches are threatened or curtailed.

When faced with adversity, they resist the temptation to hunker down or retreat. They develop plans for fighting cutbacks. If budgets are cut, they present a clear sense of priorities and a plan for reducing programs in a way that focuses on essentials, minimizes reductions to essential services, and cushions impact on staff.

3. *Develop Effective Strategies.*

Mission and vision statements are essential, experts agree, but it can take too long to develop and refine them. In the meantime, particularly in times of fast-paced change, unforeseen opportunities may have passed, or unforeseen crises may have arrived. A.G. Lafley and Roger Martin in *Playing to Win* suggest we move faster by shortening discussions of mission and vision, reducing lengthy planning, and focusing more on strategy, “an integrated set of choices” that positions the organization to “create sustainable advantage and superior value.” This book and other recent literature describe strategy on a fast track:

What “Lean Startups” Do Differently

Organizations that follow the “lean startup” approach take a view that differs from traditional ones. The following chart illustrates these changes. Developed by Steve Blank, it appears in “Why the Lean Start-Up Changes Everything,” *Harvard Business Review*, May 2013.

Feature	Traditional	Lean
Strategy	Business plan Implementation-driven	Business model Hypothesis-driven
New-product process	Product management Prepare offering for market following a linear, step-by-step plan	Customer development Get out of the office and test hypotheses
Engineering	Agile or waterfall development Build the product iteratively or fully specify the product before building it	Agile development Build the product iteratively and incrementally
Organization	Departments by function Hire for experience and ability to execute	Customers and agile development teams Hire for learning, nimbleness, and speed
Financial management	Accounting Income statement, balance sheet, cash flow statement	Metrics that matter Customer acquisition cost, lifetime customer value, churn, viralness
Failure	Exception Fix by firing executives	Expected Fix by iterating on ideas and pivoting away from those that don't work
Speed	Measured Operates on complete data	Rapid Operates on good-enough data

- Develop a “winning aspiration” – a concise statement of what the program seeks to be and what “winning” or success will look like.
- Define the distinct or unique value the program offers – what it does that no one else can do, and why that is important. For RIM programs, that might be risk management, legal defensibility, cost savings, or organization of records and information for quick access.
- Define issues, but don't get bogged down. Move quickly to define two or more mutually exclusive options that could resolve each issue. That moves the discussion to strategies and solutions rather than problems and obstacles.

- Specify the conditions for success. For each possibility, what must be true for it to be strategically sound?
- Test for feasibility, distinctiveness, and customer satisfaction on small pilot projects, if possible.
- Identify barriers and obstacles.
- Determine what management capabilities and systems are required.

4. Speed up Innovation.

Traditional project management often involves substantial projects, extensive planning, intensive management, and strict definitions of success: on time, within budget, and within project specifications. Newer approaches are more pragmatic, improvisational, iterative, and faster. Rather

than beginning with a business plan, they start with the search for a model. Quick rounds of experimentation and feedback reveal what works. The newer approaches emphasize breaking large projects into smaller ones, bringing in new ideas, experimenting, adapting, using what works, and learning quickly from unsuccessful initiatives.

Eric Ries in *The Lean Startup* emphasizes shortened development cycles, extensive customer engagement, and continual feedback in the development of new services and products. The book advances these two concepts: 1) *validated learning*, which means to try an initial idea and quickly measure it to see if it moves toward the goal of

building a sustainable program; and 2) to *pivot*, or make a “structured course correction designed to test a new fundamental hypothesis about the product [or] strategy.”

Peter Sims recommends “little bets” – discrete “concrete actions taken to discover, test, and develop ideas that are achievable and affordable.” These can result in “small wins” you can build on and extend, or “failing quickly to learn fast” from small, experimental projects. You can then use the insights to modify the idea or try something entirely different. (For additional perspectives, see the sidebar “What Lean Startups Do Differently.”)

RIM programs that are agile and adaptive need motivated and empowered staff. Leaders need to solicit ideas from employees who interact with customers every day and, therefore, are in the best position to discern emerging needs and opportunities.

Additionally, since RIM program managers cannot anticipate every eventuality, it is useful to empower staff to make on-the-spot decisions and use workarounds to meet customer needs. Hiring employees who are inclined toward innovation is an essential prerequisite. Setting clear goals and empowering people to reach them – by allowing a fair amount of leeway in how they do their work – are helpful tactics.

Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer’s book *The Progress Principle* explains that “a sense of progress” is a key motivator. On days when workers sense they’re making headway or when they receive support that helps them overcome obstacles, their emotions tend to be positive and their drive to work even harder is high. On days when they feel they’re wasting their time, encountering roadblocks, or fighting red tape, their motivation and engagement tend to be the lowest. Amabile and Kramer advise managers to clarify goals, ensure that workers’ efforts are properly supported, use minor problems and

setbacks as learning opportunities, and provide positive feedback and recognition.

Adrian Gostick and Chester Elton in *All In* advance the idea of “a culture of belief” that includes articulating a “burning platform” core message about the urgency of the work, treating staff as colleagues and talented partners rather than employees, broadly sharing information, establishing accountability, and continuously expressing appreciation and recognition.

They advise leaders to aim to

Setting clear goals and empowering people to reach them – by allowing a fair amount of leeway in *how* they do their work – are helpful tactics.

make everyone feel *engaged* (attached to the program, willing to give extra effort), *enabled* (empowerment is the norm; initiative is valued), and *energized* (having a sense of well-being and drive).

5. Use a ‘Culture of Participation.’

Staff input is essential for fast-paced, customer-focused innovation, but Thomas Davenport and Brook Manville in *Judgment Calls* advocate going further to get the best solutions. Leaders need to make decisions in a timely way, they explain, but often this involves creating processes and systems for finding the best means of quickly gathering and processing information.

The book recommends “the power of leveraging colleagues, partners, and ‘networks of learning,’ trading away absolute power and hierarchy for more facilitative leadership that engages a broader and diverse mind for the challenges of today’s more complex business environments.” Tactics include:

- Define goals in ways that are quantifiable, where possible, and use data and analytics to make decisions.
- Identify model programs and best practices by monitoring blogs, social media, and other electronic discussion formats.
- Engage customers in more extensive and creative ways through dialog, recognizing they may find it challenging to articulate their needs in the complicated information arena, and they may need explanation of the program’s

capabilities and limitations.

- Conduct discussions of key issues that need decisions by bringing in differing viewpoints, encouraging spirited, constructive debate, and respecting dissenting opinions. Staff and customers are key participants, but involving other areas, such as IT, counsel, and media, may bring in fresh perspectives.
- Keep goals in mind, but encourage discussion of new ways of reaching them. *Judgment Calls* describes this as “following a strong compass but often in unpredictable and even nonlinear ways.”

6. Monitor and Adapt CIOs’ Strategies.

RIM programs are not alone in gearing up for the volatile post-recession, information-centric world. They can learn from others who are being buffeted by the winds of change, especially chief information officers (CIOs). There is a natural connection – some RIM programs

are in CIOs' offices, and many work with CIOs on a daily basis. Some CIO strategies are worthy of emulation, such as visibly supporting enterprise goals, demonstrating value at the CEO level where it may be under-appreciated, and cooperating with other offices in pushing their companies into new customer, product, and service areas.

CIO magazine's 2013 "State of the CIO Survey" highlights the need to align with enterprise goals, market the IT department to give the businesses a better idea of its capabilities, and position the office as a business peer that develops, not just enables, business strategy.

This entails pushing the program into new areas with new partnerships in support of evolving enterprise priorities. Gartner's "2013 CIO Agenda" notes that "IT must adapt by extending its role in the enterprise ... hunt for new digital business opportunities, and harvest value from business process changes and extended products/services." Likewise, RIM programs must hunt for new opportunities.

Stepping up to the Challenge

RIM programs are well positioned to capitalize on the growing importance of digital information in business, education, government, and the lives of individuals. They have strong capabilities in issues that are increasing in importance, such as retention and disposition of records, legal applications, risk management, and privacy.

But RIM programs should expect – and welcome – change, sometimes gradual and incremental and other times rapid and transformational. Leading that change in a positive way is one of the greatest challenges – and opportunities – we face. **END**

Bruce W. Dearstyne, Ph.D., can be contacted at dearstyne@verizon.net. See his bio on page 47.

Recent Useful Leadership Books

Amabile, Teresa and Steven Kramer. *The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work*. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2011.

Baldoni, John. *Lead With Purpose: Giving Your Organization a Reason to Believe in Itself*. New York: Amacom, 2012.

Andersen, Erika. *Leading So People Will Follow*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2012.

Collins, Jim and Morten T. Hansen. *Great by Choice: Uncertainty, Chaos, and Luck – Why Some Thrive Despite Them All*. New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2011.

Davenport, Tom and Brook Manville. *Judgment Calls: 12 Stories of Big Decisions and the Teams That Got Them Right*. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2012.

Duggan, William. *Creative Strategy: A Guide for Innovation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

Gostick, Adrian and Chester Elton. *All In: How The Best Managers Create a Culture of Belief and Drive Big Results*. New York: Free Press, 2012.

Lafley, A.G. and Roger L. Martin. *Playing to Win: How Strategy Really Works*. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2013.

Mellon, Liz. *Inside the Leader's Mind: Five Ways to Think Like a Leader*. Harlow, UK: Pearson Education Limited, 2011.

Menkes, Justin. *Better Under Pressure: How Great Leaders Bring Out the Best in Themselves and Others*. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2011.

Ries, Eric. *The Lean Startup: How Today's Entrepreneurs Use Continuous Innovation to Create Radically Successful Businesses*. New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2011.

Sims, Peter. *Little Bets: How Breakthrough Ideas Emerge from Small Discoveries*. New York: Free Press, 2011.

Zolli, Andrew and Ann Marie Healy. *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back*. New York: Free Press, 2012.