

# The Principles Assessment as a Collaborative Tool

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**J**ohn Isaza, Esq., FAI – a 24-year veteran attorney with a dozen years of records and information management (RIM) experience who works for international law firm Rimon PC – regularly uses the Generally Accepted Recordkeeping Principles® (the Principles) and the Information Governance Maturity Model (Maturity Model) in his work for clients. (See [www.arma.org/principles](http://www.arma.org/principles) for more information about the Principles.)

The majority of his time, about 65%, is spent doing compliance assessments and audits of existing programs, and the rest is devoted to formulating new RIM and/or information governance programs.

One of Isaza's main tools for accomplishing this work has been ARMA International's automated Principles Assessment tool. His first-hand experience has yielded several insights on how to use this tool most effectively in real-world environments and provides many lessons learned that will be useful for RIM practitioners.

## Conducting the Assessment

The Principles Assessment is a computer-based tool that provides an automated way to determine how an entity's information management practices measure up against the Maturity Model.

The tool requires answers to 100 questions related to the eight principles: accountability, transparency, integrity, protection, compliance, availability, retention, and disposition. By selecting the answer that most closely



matches the current situation, the Principles Assessment will calculate a score for each principle. The scores correlate to levels ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 being substandard and 5 being considered transformational. The Principles Assessment can be used for a single department, a division, or the entire organization.

As with all tools, there are tips and techniques that can enhance the usefulness of the assessment. Isaza's solid consulting experience has yielded several pointers that he generously shares here.

## Involve Others

"Don't just do it all yourself," cautions Isaza. In situations where the records manager performs the entire assessment, there is the risk of rating too high or too low on various program aspects, and the outcome will be subjective and, therefore, less credible. Isaza advises that the best way to ensure objectivity is to get responses from others in the organization. How to do this can be challenging, though.

"Don't think that you can just send the tool to everyone in the firm and have them answer questions on their

own,” advises Isaza. Many questions seem to be redundant from one principle to the next, but they actually have a different context and may need clarification for those who are not involved with RIM as their primary responsibility. “What’s more,” says Isaza, “Each question must be answered before going on to the next, and people will not necessarily be able or willing to do this.”

### **Use Facilitated Workshops**

Isaza has found that workshops can be an ideal setting for a collaborative use of the Principles Assessment, and his experience with four clients in diverse industries – automotive, non-profit, insurance, and financial services – has proven that this approach works.

A workshop is a way to gather several people in a single place and poll them for their opinions and perceptions of RIM. The workshop setting also offers a relaxed atmosphere where discussion and informal RIM education can take place.

**Preparing** – Advance preparation is key, however. Isaza notes, “If you choose a workshop setting, recognize that you will need to do some preparation. First, and most importantly, you will need to have someone with RIM knowledge in the room to help with explanations where needed.”

According to Isaza, it is unrealistic to expect to get through the tool’s 100 questions in a workshop lasting an hour and a half. The best practice is for the RIM manager to spend time analyzing which questions should be presented to the workshop group and which can best be answered in advance. Given the limited time available for most workshop participants, it pays to select the questions that deliver the biggest return. Isaza also notes that some questions and proposed responses may profit from being simplified for better understanding.

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### **John Isaza: A Career Overview**



John Isaza, Esq., FAI, is a leader in Rimon PC’s Corporate Governance and Records and Information Management practice areas. Rimon is an international law firm with offices in the United States and Israel. The firm’s name is the Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic word for pomegranate, a traditional symbol of excellence, community, and innovation, the firm’s three core values.

A lawyer for 24 years, Isaza has been in the records and information management (RIM) field since 2001, and his prior experience in litigation, corporate law, and investment banking serves him well in his current position. His work has included engagements in oil and gas, financial services, government, technology, insurance, food, entertainment, manufacturing, automotive, and legal services sectors. In addition to his law degree, Isaza holds a real estate license and several securities industry licenses.

challenging because of slow response time in some environments,” says Isaza. Providing the selected questions on PowerPoint or by other means may make for a smoother, more productive experience in a live setting.

**Scoring** – Each workshop participant chooses a response for each question. The results are averaged to arrive at a score (from 1 to 5) for how the organization is doing in that particular principle. For example, if 10 workshop participants choose answers to questions about the Principle of Availability that range from level 2 to level 4, the average might be a level 3 for that principle. There may be multiple workshops with different participants in each, depending on the size of the organization.

In addition, Isaza and the records manager each completes his or her own scoring. Isaza then averages his rating and the records manager’s, using this as an additional workshop session. To arrive at the overall rating, Isaza’s methodology is to average the scores from each workshop for each category. He notes that comments are captured during the process and that he supplements the workshops with some individual interviews as well.

### **Balance Effort with Need**

Concerns about accuracy need to be balanced with practical considerations. Approaching an assessment as

an audit can be cost prohibitive, advises Isaza. Asking to see documentary evidence for every aspect of each principle generally puts a strain on organization resources and may not necessarily yield better data than the multiple opinions available in the workshop setting.

Another consideration is to recognize that the degree of rating accuracy in a collaborative setting will probably be just fine for the purpose of the assessment. Attempting to get very scientific or statistical with the ratings can also be expensive and more than is actually needed for the organization’s purpose.

### **Using the Results**

The assessment scores provide a way for those at all levels of the organization to understand how the firm is doing in regard to information management. Many times Isaza is dealing with chief executive officers and director-level management. Assessment results are often delivered with a supplemental report identifying major technology, people, policy, and risk considerations based on the assessment outcome and observations.

### **Set Metrics**

“One of the most useful outcomes of the Principles Assessment and the Maturity Model is the ability to set baseline metrics that can be tracked

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over time. These become something that the organization can use to gauge improvement, to base future audits on, and most importantly, to communicate to the C-level suite what the folks in information management are doing,” says Isaza.

Furthermore, Isaza notes, “If you overlay the factors significant to a particular industry, you can put together a roadmap for future activity and set priorities that make sense for that organization within that industry.”

### **Plan, Prioritize Activities**

For example, one of Isaza’s financial services clients had completely acceptable ratings in the areas of integrity, protection, and compliance, but recognized the importance of these principles given the increasing regulation, the growing amount of personal information associated with its work, and the reputation risk associated with its industry. Even with acceptable scores, this client sought recommendations that would take the organization to higher levels of maturity in these areas.

In another example, the law department of a national non-profit, already aware of certain challenges with availability, retention, and disposition within the department, was able to identify and prioritize areas for improvement and to take positive steps that would boost scores almost immediately. For this client, immediate steps included hiring a records manager, revising old retention schedules,

and putting technology in place to foster secure storage, collaboration, remote access, and other Principles-guided capabilities.

### **Benchmark Against Others**

Within the corporate world, there are ways to judge one organization’s performance against that of others in the same industry segment. Financial ratios, for example, measure such things as an organization’s ability to meet its short-term debt or its overall effectiveness based on the returns generated on sales and investment. Financial analysts expect to see such ratios fall within a certain range for segments such as manufacturing or retail.

Although there are no such industry benchmarks for information management, consultants are often knowledgeable about what similar firms in a given industry have done regarding information management. In the absence of industry metrics, they can be a source of general guidance regarding what project priorities should be in terms of a Principles-based action plan.

In addition, consultants often have access to multiple layers of management and can be useful in raising awareness at the highest levels of the firm. While consultants will not divulge the names of their clients or provide specific details of any client’s program, they can provide a general idea of how your organization compares to others.

### **Increasing the Score**

“For many organizations, scores increase dramatically by increasing the role of RIM in decision making and improving communication between departments,” Isaza says. “For example, information technology (IT) may rate itself a 5 in one aspect, but the law department may rate IT only a 2, simply because IT has not communicated the steps it has taken to ensure a higher level of maturity.”

Another item that can immediately boost scores, says Isaza, is the establishment of an information governance committee as a way to increase senior management sponsorship and communications.

“On the other hand, clients are sometimes surprised at the number of things they hadn’t thought of. Folks in IT may not be as aware of the principles of retention and disposition because they are in charge of transporting data, he notes. “Sometimes they are surprised at how much there is in terms of specific rules and laws.”

### **Assessing Your Organization**

Used in a workshop setting, the Principles Assessment tool can be an excellent way to focus attention, guide understanding of the Maturity Model, and produce a credible picture of an organization’s information management practices. The workshop itself is an opportunity to raise RIM awareness and provide education on the foundations of a standards-driven RIM program. The facilitated workshop is also an excellent way to cross organization lines and to begin taking a cross-disciplinary, collaborative approach to managing contemporary information issues and concerns. It’s definitely worth a try. **END**

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