Case Studies in Managing Change

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I was once a part of a RIM department that provided a textbook example of how *not* to launch a new tool and a new paradigm to go with it. Years later, I took part in a very successful implementation of a strategy change that included an end-user behavior reset and adoption. In this article, I discuss why one change-oriented project failed and the other thrived.

A Failed Approach

The textbook failure – *mea culpa* – was in transitioning to a new document management system (DMS) in a politically driven government agency with about 600 staff. There was a newly elected mayor and a newly appointed agency president.

The Environment

The electronic records infrastructure was made up of rogue file shares on numerous onsite servers. The program deliverable required a transition from this unregulated, decentralized approach to a centralized DMS with unified taxonomies and retention that would manage records in place and provide robust searching capabilities to find and share documents.

RIM Objective

Our task was to deliver this solution enterprise-wide. I arrived as the last member of a newly established records and information management (RIM) team. This wasn't to be merely a transition or migration of electronic records into a new solution, it would also be a paradigm shift in how people saved their work, with greater rigor around managing agency assets.

Further, most of the agency's work force members were seasoned users who had become accustomed to the way they had stored electronic records over the years. And that's what it essentially was – mere data storage.

Project Issues

I noticed issues from the beginning that led to the project's failure, including these:

We didn't prepare adequately. The RIM leads frequently met with the vendor development team and information technology (IT), but not with the users. They did not plan introduction meetings or quick announcements at an all-hands meeting to introduce this project, even though it affected everyone. There were no change roadmaps, no behavior studies or analytics, or even heat maps to promote the transition.

We did not promote the project. This seemed to be a highly confidential project with little publicity even though it was to be delivered to all internal users. Data was pulled from the back-end for strategizing, but there was no transparency with those outside the team.

We did not allow users enough input. We selected individuals from different departments to be part of a pilot group to help develop and embrace this business shift, but these sessions were sporadic and driven by the solution, which didn't leave much room for input from the users. The message they received was, "Here is what you are going to do." This eventually led to one user saying, "This is simply not going to work and I won't do it."

We tried to do too much, too fast – and it was too complicated. As we created process workflow maps, I immediately noticed that our re-engineering plan was going to create culture shock for anyone creating and saving a document. We were trying to "boil the ocean" instead of taking small steps, building confidences, and collaborating on successes.

Despite the concerns I voiced several times, C-level staff took the aggressive stance that we were going to take advantage of the solution's sophisticated services. This meant changing users' practice of saving documents any way and anywhere they wanted to forcing them to use a micro-managed, metadata-driven repository. This was a complete disruption to the ecosystem. Users questioned the necessity of the change and asked how the benefit of making it would outweigh the burden.

It was a large burden: The design included thousands of retention categories, including more than 231 document types within a single department. To save a document to the tool, end users were required to populate 14 fields. I didn't find one person who knew where to find the retention schedule needed to categorize properly.

It was clearly unmanageable and unsustainable. There were policy, enforcement, and compliance issues – and too many loopholes that allowed users to opt-out of the system. It was like seeing a dangerous iceberg, but being unable to maneuver around it to avoid catastrophe.

We did not collaborate well. A battle for control between the heads of the IT and RIM departments created contentious interactions that were uncomfortable, softened participation, promoted indecision within the change team, and caused confusion for the vendor. Better collaboration would have produced more clarity, helping bridge the gaps among technology, governance, and policy/compliance personnel.

We did not communicate well. The greatest issue was the lack of communication all around – between department leads and C-Level administrators, between the change teams and the vendor, and within the agency as a whole.

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Lessons Learned

I would like to say that the marketing of the tool failed, but the truth is that there was no real plan. And, of course, I failed. As the new project manager, I implemented strict process strategies. When they were not well received, I changed gears and moved forward with a different approach.

This was a mistake. I should have stayed the course and worked harder to help others understand the process better. Instead, I deferred, letting fear and my desire to "fit-in" drive my actions instead of relying on my experience and knowledge.

I worked on this project for more than a year before I moved on. I heard later that the project was shelved indefinitely. I learned from this experience and promised myself that I would do things differently. Little did I know the opportunity would come sooner, rather than later.

The Success Story

I soon moved to another organization, where I served as the records manager of a mid-sized firm with multiple locations and some growing pains.

The Problem

Immediately, I discovered the need for a change in the way the physical records were being managed. My manager agreed, so I knew this issue was on the firm's radar.

The physical structure in this quasi-decentralized environment needed a facelift. The labels on the files and the folders needed to be updated to better serve the attorneys and secretaries and to improve efficiencies.

The Solution

The following describes how we made this a successful project:

We prepared adequately. I immediately put into place an action plan. I examined the file folder structure and put together a strategy for the roll-out. The structure had been used for decades, and a change would require careful maneuvering and input from the RIM team, the users, and IT.

I first shared my ideas with my manager, who had more than 20 years with the firm and could provide accurate guidance about the firm's culture. The manager approved my plan.

Next, I went to my RIM team, gave suggestions, and asked for members' input. The discussions were productive, partly because the team members saw the need for the change, but also because as their new manager, I was seeking their insight. This showed that I was sensitive to their feelings and was working to build trust and effect a team effort. I listened and continued an open dialogue throughout the process.

Once I had their support, I began researching the tools that would work with our existing systems and streamline the file creation process.

We communicated and collaborated well with others. Next, I sought input from the IT team, which was responsible for the project budget and could address any technical and connectivity concerns. In the process, I built relationships with IT staff and continued seeking their ideas and approval before moving forward. I already had the solution in mind, but I wanted the IT manager and team's buy-in so the implementation would have their ongoing support. With IT's blessing, I moved forward.

I was able to share general RIM knowledge and methodologies so they had a better understanding of how things worked and what we could do for them.

The next step was the most complex. I was in the position of an outsider facilitating a significant behavior change, so I knew I would need the support of the secretaries. In reality, the attorneys only wanted what they wanted when they wanted it; the secretaries were on the hook to deliver. I knew it wasn't going to be easy to win them over, as many had been at the firm for 15 to 20 years and had partnered with associates who had gone on to become senior members.

We asked for end user input. I began attending all of the secretary meetings. At the end of each one, I asked for a few minutes to discuss my plan, answer their questions, and seek their input. As a RIM professional, I knew what the best solution was, so I wasn't actually looking for guidance – I was simply working to make the key users feel they were part of the decision making process and had a stake in its success. I also made sure to demonstrate how these improvements would make their jobs easier:

- The files would have more reference information on them, rather than the murky "miscellaneous" label.
- Abbreviations would be eliminated, improving accurate retrieval by eliminating the need to "decode."
- The client and matter number would be added to the file for easy, at-a-glance reference.
- Labels would be color coded for easier identification and to minimize misfiling.

By working so closely with the secretaries, I was able to share general RIM knowledge and methodologies so they had a better understanding of how things worked and what we could do for them. In fact, I was also able to provide many of them access to the records management system so they could see their existing files for each matter, which helped them determine how to best categorize their new files.

The End Result

In the end, the results were impressive. There was a 48% increase in file creation time from the previous system, with 50% more real estate on the file labels. Most important, we had **100**% compliance and user acceptance for all offices. One secretary said, "It makes so much sense now. I am able to change the way I create files for my different attorneys and there's no confusion!"

In short, this project succeeded because we did the opposite of what had caused the earlier one to fail. The end users were included in the process from start to finish. Small steps were taken so as not to overwhelm anyone. And, of course, careful communication was a priority from day one to the roll-out. **END**

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