

AMTEC's Malcolm Beach says electronic document and records management is more than a passing fad.

# Here to stay

## THE MODERNISING

Government initiative – whose deadline of 2005 is fast approaching – has forced public sector organisations to address their management of electronic records, and many have elected to include both document and records management functionality in the scope of their projects.

But mention electronic document and records management (EDRM) to many commercial companies and you will get either a blank look or a yawn.

As with many innovations, the hype and promises of EDRM have not been matched by reality and experience.

The paperless office has not materialised and organisations are still struggling with their paper management. Seldom has EDRM been regarded as the document and records management silver bullet.

But can the private sector just ignore EDRM? Is it going to follow the fate of CASE (computer aided software engineering) which promised much, had wide publicity and take-up, and ended up as shelfware in many organisations? Or is EDRM something that organisations still need to seriously consider?

In first analysing what EDRM encompasses, Figure 1 highlights the key areas involved in managing electronic information effectively.

Clearly, records management and document management are two distinct areas. They can be addressed in isolation and many organisations have done so, implementing solutions for one or the other. However, there is often value in tackling the two together or as part of a wider programme of work that may include workflow, content

management and knowledge management.

As with most electronically enabled change, EDRM is not just about implementing technology but about changing ways of working (policies, processes and culture), supported by technologies to improve the management of an organisation's documents and records.

EDRM encompasses the capture, storage and retrieval of documents and records, potentially both paper and electronic, including workflow, content and knowledge management.

## Reasons to invest

The case for continuing to address EDRM is stronger than the reasons for ignoring it, for the following key reasons:

- Growth in electronic documents and records.

No-one needs to be persuaded that the volume of electronic documents and records, especially emails, is growing rapidly.

Most information generated by an organisation appears electronically. Most information received by organisations is electronic or is obtainable in electronic format. Email systems are overloaded with messages, not all of which are spam or irrelevant.

It is estimated that 90% of an organisation's information exists in unstructured form, with only 10% being managed within application systems.

Information is being kept in electronic format rather than paper and to maximise the benefit, organisations must have systems and processes to manage this information.

EDRM can help a company ensure it does not drown under the volume of this data by

organising information into logical groupings, providing powerful search capabilities to find relevant information, and ensuring that information is deleted once its business need has past.

- Ongoing access to information.

Paper is widely used as a medium for long-term storage. Provided the physical paper is kept in good conditions, it is readable for many years. Take a trip to The National Archives in Kew and you can view the original Domesday books, which are over 900 years old.

However, without careful planning and processes, it is very easy to store electronic information and then be unable to retrieve it. Sixteen years after it was created, the £2.5 million BBC Domesday Project achieved the unexpected and unwelcome status of being unreadable. Much effort was involved in finally making the information accessible.

How many organisations have electronic records stored on magnetic tapes, created by systems that were replaced a number of years ago? Part of an EDRM project involves assessing and planning for continued access to electronic records.

Without this planning the information becomes unavailable, and therefore worthless.

- Compliance with legislation and regulations.

All organisations work within regulations and legal requirements. Some of these are sector specific – such as financial, pharmaceutical or public – others tend to span all sectors, such as the requirement to keep financial records for at least seven years.

Many of these rules and

regulations relate to information. Some legislation specifically addresses the requirement to effectively manage electronic information, such as the National Archives target for government organisations to implement an EDRMS by 2004. The private sector is also facing compliance requirements with the Sarbanes-Oxley Act being prominent in the past year. Basel II is another requirement that focuses on financial sector organisations.

With much content being held in electronic format, it is imperative that organisations are able to manage their information in a manner that complies with requirements.

The implications for organisations that do not comply with regulations and legislation can be enormous. In 2002, British American Tobacco (BAT) destroyed documents that were relevant to a court case. Because of this the judge threw out BAT's defence. As a result, BAT share prices dropped 5%.

● Business benefits.

EDRM not only allows

organisations to mitigate risks and comply with external requirements, it also provides direct benefits including:

- easier and better sharing of information across the organisation.
- more effective retention of corporate memory.
- easier control of versions of documents.
- sound and comprehensive audit trails.

The fact that organisations addressing EDRM must also consider cultural and business dimensions, encourages companies to review and improve the policies and processes that support effective information sharing and management.

Even if an organisation decides not to implement full technology-driven EDRMS, by upgrading its policies, processes and overarching systems it will gain tangible benefits in terms of access, effective management and reducing the costs associated with information management.

● Basis for other functions.

As Figure 1 shows, EDRM is

part of a wider set of functions that affect the effectiveness of an organisation's information management.

Probably the most closely related are workflow, content management and knowledge management, which while building on a largely behavioural foundation, have a strong dependency on information being effectively managed and easily retrievable.

When an organisation considers EDRM, it should also assess the interfaces with other areas and whether these carry value or are likely to have an adverse effect.

EDRM can underpin and support many other areas, such as providing a controlled repository of information for knowledge management products to interrogate.

As an example, whilst working with one client it became obvious that extending the scope of the solution beyond strict EDRM would help them respond to queries.

A simple workflow solution combined with scanning incoming mail reduced the

amount of paper flow down from 20 copies to a single paper original, cutting the amount of paper stored and helping speed up the process of responding to queries.

**Conclusion**

Has EDRM had its day? Quite the opposite.

The reality of business life is that electronic documents and records are here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future. Every email is a record, every file a source of information that carries a cost. Organisations shy away from the challenge, but they must accept the need to effectively manage their electronic documents.

Some continue to print and file in hard copy. Others use standard network storage and others implement EDRM systems.

Whatever the approach, the business driver is still the same - to control and manage the information in a cost-effective way. This means that EDRM will not disappear off the horizon of organisational projects.

Even when the Modernising Government timescales pass, government organisations will still need to manage their electronic records, both for business efficiency and to meet legislative requirements (such as the Freedom of Information Act).

Private sector organisations also face compliance requirements that will force them to demonstrate effective management of their electronic information (such as Sarbanes-Oxley).

There will always be pressure to manage information more effectively, and with increasing volumes and dependency on electronic documents and records, EDRM is with us for the long run.

● *Malcolm Beach is a senior consultant specialising in EDRM at AMTEC Consulting. Tel: 01252 737866. Email: malcolm.beach@amtec.co.uk.*

FIGURE 1: Key areas in managing electronic information

