

Malcolm Beach sums up the issues to consider with new document/records management systems.

Up and running

AN ELECTRONIC document and records management system (EDRMS) implementation can only be deemed successful when it is being used as intended and the organisation is receiving the full benefit of its investment.

There have been many EDRMS projects over the past few years, especially in the public sector. Other areas, including pharmaceutical and legal, also have years of experience in implementing such systems. So given this reasonably wide set of experience, can we guarantee that implementing an EDRMS will be easy and successful?

Well, no. Just because there are a number of successful EDRMS implementations does not guarantee success in every case. Even now there are cases of unsuccessful projects, and some have even been cancelled before completion.

It may be true that it is easy to install the software. However, this is a small part of an EDRMS implementation, and there is a lot of supporting work that must be done. This article identifies a number of key issues that must be addressed, which can be broadly grouped into four main areas:

1. People issues.

Implementing an EDRMS is primarily a business change project. Business change involves people and it is essential to tackle people issues as early as possible, and then to continue to address them throughout the life of the project.

One of the big challenges is to ensure that people use the system as desired. Most individuals do not like change and the introduction of an EDRMS will in most cases be a

change to the way that information is managed.

The degree of change will depend on the organisation, but at the very least people are often uncomfortable about moving their information into a corporate area (ie, the EDRMS). Common concerns include:

- I don't want someone to see my work until I am ready.
- My information is too sensitive to be available to other people.
- I don't want other people to change my documents.

These concerns are not without some validity. Most people know that their early document drafts are likely to be disjointed, and possibly incorrect or incoherent. To make them available to other people raises the concern that you will be judged on the basis of incomplete work.

One approach is to ensure that people mark documents as drafts, and that everyone realises that a document, although available to read, may not necessarily be complete.

There will always be information that is too sensitive to be made widely available. Performance appraisal data is one obvious example. It is essential to have areas available for personal information. The challenge is to ensure that this area does not become a *de facto* storage area for all work.

The issue of people being able to change documents can be addressed by limiting their access rights. It is desirable, in the interests of information sharing, to allow widespread read-access to information – but this does not equate to allowing everyone to have write-access.

Even if a document is changed, a good EDRMS will have an audit trail that will identify who has made changes.

Most systems will hold a number of versions, and if a document is changed, the earlier version can be retrieved.

Setting access rights can limit the impact of this – for example, by limiting who is able to delete earlier versions of documents.

Change management must be addressed if an EDRMS implementation project is to be successful. But getting people to change takes time and it is unreasonable to assume you can squeeze this into a one-day training session just before you launch the system.

Making people aware of the new system early can help to build a desire for it, which will in turn help to overcome resistance. However, be careful about over-selling too early.

2. Process issues.

An EDRMS is simply a software tool, and in order to use any software effectively, the right supporting processes must be in place.

An important element of business change is to review the way work is performed. You need to review your existing processes to see whether they are still valid in the new environment. You also need to develop new processes to support the changes you wish to introduce.

One simple example is the need for a review and disposal process. In a paper environment, many organisations had ways of ensuring information was destroyed as needed. However, with the move to electronic information, and the subsequent shift in responsibility to those who create the information, companies have to set up new procedures to ensure electronic information is kept according to

agreed retention policies.

The difficulty with developing new processes and amending existing ones is that you often do not know what the process should be until you require it. Experience shows that process development is a progressive activity. Draft processes can be developed before implementation. These processes can then be reviewed during the initial implementation and refined as necessary.

This approach helps ensure that processes are practical and demonstrates that the project team are listening to user feedback – which helps to promote user take-up. This has worked successfully with a number of organisations.

3. Technology issues.

While an EDRMS implementation is primarily a business change project, you are likely to encounter technical issues too.

The first step is to ensure that your procurement process identifies the major technical issues of concern to you. Specify the technical environment that the EDRMS must operate in, including any integration required with other systems (such as email or workflow systems).

There are cases of organisations that have cancelled projects after many months of work because the software could not be made to work with existing systems. If you have concerns, ask the supplier to demonstrate the integration capabilities or provide a reference site that matches your requirements.

Having bought an EDRMS, you should always test the system before going live. It is surprising how often testing identifies product flaws or nuances, both in the basic operation and in how the EDRMS interacts with other systems.

Most of the time these issues can be successfully addressed, either by amending how the product is used and configured

or by installing minor upgrades to the software.

If you go live without a certain level of structured testing, you open yourself up to the risk of implementing a system that does not work correctly or causes other problems. Suppliers should have their own test procedures – but it is your organisation that will bear the direct result of any product failure or flaw.

One client I work with always tests the product upgrades, something I strongly endorse. During one upgrade their first test failed so severely that it destroyed the PC registry settings, to the extent that the PC needed rebuilding! The moral of the story? Always test before you implement.

4. Benefits realisation.

There is a lot of debate about benefits realisation but, in the heat of the moment and under the pressure of meeting project timescales, you can too easily forget why you are doing the project.

Organisations implement EDRM systems to achieve benefits, be they compliance, improved quality of information, wider sharing of information or improved efficiency. The actual

implementation of the system is just the means to achieve these benefits.

It is important to monitor the ability of the project to deliver the benefits throughout its lifecycle. This serves two main purposes:

- Ensuring the benefits will be realised.
- Ensuring the business remains committed to the project.

Once the EDRMS has been implemented, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to remedy any shortfall in demonstrable benefits to the business.

An EDRMS project typically takes months, possibly even years, from the initial business case to completing the rollout and starting to deliver measurable benefits. If the management board are to continue supporting the project, it is important to reassure them that it will deliver the predicted business benefits. If they are not confident, this could result in the project being scaled down or even cancelled.

Project managers who regularly demonstrate how the project will meet business objectives will have the best chance of reaching successful completion.

In summary, implementing an EDRMS is not a simple task. Experience may have identified better ways of doing it but the process still has to be managed as a change project. Issues will always occur: you need to address them early, and not leave them until just before the rollout. These are the vital actions:

- Involve people early on. Set up user groups to provide a wide spectrum of input into how the system will be configured. These people can develop into local experts and champions and will help with the rollout process.
- Test the system, both from a technical and process perspective.
- Use the development and testing stages to help develop processes and ways of working. Use the system as much as you can before going live. This helps identify the best ways of working in your environment.
- Regularly review how implementing the system will help to meet the business objectives and goals.
- Ensure that you communicate the benefits of the system regularly and in a form that is relevant to the audience. Most end users are not greatly interested in organisational benefits but are extremely interested in the benefits they personally will gain.
- On the other hand, senior managers are much more interested in how implementing an EDRMS will help their organisation to meet business goals and objectives.

Following these tips will not guarantee a perfect project, but it will increase the likelihood that your organisation will implement its EDRMS successfully – and will gain the benefits that will more than justify the investment.

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



Malcolm Beach: issues will always occur – you need to address them early