

# Mission Matters In Information Management Programs

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*A corporate mission serves as a foundation for successful corporate strategies. It can do the same for the information management strategy of your business.*

In the traditional information management model, a business determines whether it will keep information only long enough to meet its basic legal obligations, or whether the rewards for keeping records longer exceed the costs of storage and backup as well as the risk of potential future discovery costs. In business environments where employees disagree with the determination (i.e., the business chooses minimal retention, but employees find value in keeping the records longer), compliance with records retention policies is lower. What is the lesson here? *All information is not equal.* If your organization's information management strategy, policies and processes reflects this reality, the likelihood that your highest value information will be correctly identified and appropriately managed increases significantly.

Aligning your information management operational strategy directly with your corporate mission offers a path to more consistent compliance across the organization. Furthermore, you may find that risks, requirements and competitive advantage related to the use, management and retention of data vary widely across your records portfolio. Identifying the role that information plays in your organization can help you tailor information management strategies, including retention policies, to fit your particular needs. Looking at your information as an asset offers a means to evaluate your overall records management approach and communicate to all staff the alignment of your information management strategy with your company's mission.

Law firms and other professional service firms typically identify the role information plays in their organizations early on in their incorporation. In these organizations, the mission is clear, and management instinctively knows that there is value in dividing the treatment of their records: administrative vs. client records. Policies for storing and retaining administrative records, i.e., those that support the general business obligations of the firm, are different and often separate from policies governing

client records. Administrative records usually receive the bare minimum on the retention spectrum, while client files are considered to have greater value because of the competitive advantage, intellectual capital and relationship value they represent. This same approach works equally well in other industries – the key is identifying that information which most closely aligns with the mission of the organization.

## Why Does Mission Matter?

Take the case of AOL's mission evolution. The company's first mission statement was *To build a global medium as central to people's lives as the telephone and the television ... and even more valuable.* In terms of business processes and the information that supports them, this mission values product development, testing, research, marketing and distribution. AOL's contemporary information management strategy and records retention policies reflected this environment. AOL achieved this goal – becoming a ubiquitous part of their customers' lives on the web – at the beginning of this decade. As AOL's business grew and its mission changed to serving an engaged community, policies evolved to reflect the related transactional business processes. In 2009, however, the company's employees redefined its mission and unveiled it to wild applause in a global all-hands meeting: *To inform, entertain and connect the world.*

How does a change in mission impact an organization's information management strategy? A new mission may embody functions requiring information that was not needed and did not exist before. The change may indicate that previously important functions no longer carry the same weight, and the related information loses value as a result. For some areas of AOL's business, context is at the heart of the new mission to inform and entertain. The juxtaposition of facts from the past placed against the new context of the present day is both informative and entertaining. The value of particular content that entertains may change over time, but it often becomes entertaining for new reasons. In past years, historical value had been appropriated under the retention program by the designation of an historical archives indicator. This was reserved for things that had historical value for the company, like pictures of ringing the bell at the New York Stock Exchange or awards received in creating the medium. But in a company where informing and entertaining are key components of the mission, developing an archiving perspective for digital data created for consumers directly aligns to the mission. Historical information and entertainment content bring competitive advantage. The thought process that goes into valuing the data changes and the information management strategy should adjust to reflect this.

## Context Plays A Role In A Process-Centric Approach

The September 2009 article, *The New Business of Managing Information – A Process-Centric Approach*,<sup>1</sup> presents some questions to help organizations gain perspective on the use of information. These are the What, How, Where, Who and Why needed to manage an organization's information efficiently and effectively. In a process-centric evaluation, the question, "Why is the information created and/or retained and managed in the first place?" is usually about what purpose the information serves in the immediate process. The meaning may change when the "why" is reviewed in the context of the organization's mission. For example, in an organization with an academic mission, raw data may be highly valuable. Analysis is a by-product that will change and be replaced over time. Change is interesting, but without the raw data, further analysis may be unreliable or infeasible. However, in a retail organization, if the goal were to meet legal and financial reporting requirements, rollout data or analysis supported by demonstrated, audited processes may be sufficient.

## Mission Drives "Business Need"

Whatever your business processes, there are decisions to be made about how to manage the information, how to protect it, how to reuse it, whether to just meet or to exceed the legal retention requirements. In many cases, no legal requirements exist relating to the creation, management, use or retention of the information. In those cases, the business must decide how valuable the information is to them. Business process owners may make a case for retention, protection or reuse of information to meet business needs and, as a result, may advocate the dramatic extension of the legally required retention period. How will you evaluate the legitimacy of these cases, assess the risks or the value of the competitive advantage associated with them?

An organization's mission directly impacts its business strategy – and that strategy outlines the highest priority activities for the organization. A strategic plan can help prioritize business processes and, in turn, provide a foundation for evaluating the information supporting those processes. In the case of AOL's mission to inform, entertain and connect, the activities related to the creation and distribution of content increase in priority. AOL creates content; collects content from other sources; allows users to create, collect and post content for public viewing; and provides tools that actually create content on their own through the linking of disparate sources and individual information items. Each of these activities, under the current mission, is a priority; therefore, the information that supports the business processes that allow these activities has a higher value to the organization over a longer period of time. You'll notice there is no legal require-

ment to maintain this information – its purpose is to entertain or provide context. In the traditional approach to evaluating records retention, this information might have a very short retention requirement – it might even be considered "non record" value – able to be destroyed "when no longer needed," as determined by the individual users. However, it is worth evaluating whether there is some competitive advantage associated with the information, and whether this could drive longer retention in the case of published and publicly available content. AOL has a records retention policy, and compliance, as outlined in its Standards of Business Conduct, is a condition of continued employment. Its retention policies are derived considering both legal requirements and value to the business, making compliance easier and more practical.

Similarly, administrative records within AOL, those records that support the business such as human resources, finance, etc., can in most cases be addressed by focusing on legal and regulatory requirements. If the core value of the records is the meeting of corporate obligations, these corporate obligations can serve as a starting point for retention. This reduces the resources expended in crafting schedules and policies. Operating requirements are considered but only where they extend beyond legal and regulatory requirements and considerations.

## Mission-Driven Meets Process-Centric

The process of assigning retention values described in the process-centric approach works well in the context of a mission-driven strategy. The mission and strategic plan of the organization prioritize the highest value business processes, influencing the information management strategy, impacting the records retention periods, protection and reuse decisions, and the resources expended on the highest priority information. The links among business processes, information systems and information types provide the context for naming, storing, managing and locating the information throughout the organization.

## Summary

The combination of the mission-driven approach to information management strategy development and the process-centric approach for consistent identification, naming, storage and management of information results in an information management program that reflects the true value of an organization's information. This alignment increases program compliance, enhances the availability of competitively advantageous information to the organization, and reduces costs and risk over time.

<sup>1</sup> *The New Business of Managing Information – A Process-Centric Approach*, Robert Kirtley, Maura Dunn and Lee Karas, The Metropolitan Corporate Counsel, September 2009.

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