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Top-Down, Bottom-Up: Enabling Information Discovery to Help Dress the Emperor

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In February 2009, the Records and Information Management Sustainability (RIMS) project was launched at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The project is a two-year initiative involving the archives staff collaborating with the Office of Business and Financial Services (OBFS). OBFS is comprised of more than 40 units that consist of functional areas spanning from payroll and purchasing to agricultural property management and student loans services.

The primary goal of the two-year project is to develop sustainable practices and standards for managing records and information resources for which OBFS units have a key management responsibility. This goal will translate into the creation of recommendations for managing records and information resources (both paper and electronic) and creating a template for a functional classification scheme that will be useful beyond the borders of the OBFS units. The project will streamline processes for records disposal in accordance with requirements of the Illinois State Records Act.

It would be fair to say a large portion of the efforts of the RIMS project has been spent conducting surveys of unit activities, records, and other documents. Nonetheless, the approach used for this information gathering has been with an eye toward building a functional classification scheme and toward recommending best practices for managing information that may not be considered records. The scope of recommendations will extend across both paper and electronic formats.

The project approaches information gathering from both the "bottom-up" and the "top-down." This dual approach has proved valuable not only in sustaining the project's momentum but also in fostering a truly inclusive environment for information discovery. By discovering information across so many different functional units within the context of this one project, more information has been gathered, and the project is better positioned to highlight good information management practices and to create an environment of cooperation and awareness that is sustainable.

Initial information was gathered by gaining access to file structures listings of the shared hard drives of each unit.

Records liaisons were assigned and then asked to identify the types of e-documents stored in each folder and what activities they support. Project specialists met individually with records liaisons to help them fill in information on spreadsheets used as data collection tools. Records liaisons were also asked to record summaries of physically stored documents and summaries of folders within their E-mail.

Once most of the "bottom-up" information was gathered, group meetings were held with records liaisons to begin identifying key activities each of their units engage in on a regular basis. Activity information represents information gathered from the "top-down." Activities were mapped to a draft set of business functions. The draft set of business functions was created initially by consulting numerous sources, including the Australian Keyword AAA Thesaurus (http://www.records.nsw.gov.au/recordkeeping/keyword-products/keyword-aaa/) and a functional classification scheme provided by Monash University. Through innumerable iterations, the functions have been refined, remixed, extended, and condensed to better reflect the university's environment and sensibilities about business and financial functions. These functions will be used as a starting point for a broader initiative to develop general records retention schedules for the university, rather than records retention schedules based on organizational units. Especially with respect to environments using enterprise resources planning (ERP) systems, general records retention schedules have long been considered a more effective approach to managing records retention and disposal.

Where possible, records liaisons were asked to identify software systems and applications (in-house, vendor supplied, or outsourced) that support unit activities. This exercise revealed an unforeseen depth and complexity of the information storage systems employed by the university administration. These inquiries quickly scaled beyond the scope or ability of the RIMS project to fully investigate. However, they revealed that poor coordination in the deployment of IT solutions has resulted in further silo-like developments with varying degrees of success. To put it another way, unearthing innumerable software systems and applications layered on top of or alongside of the ERP, called UI-Integrate, underscored just how naked the emperor really is, even if no one is talking about it.

One example of the emperor's nakedness can be seen by a quick look at the deployment of Xtender, the document image capture system deployed to support the many business processes intertwined with UI-Integrate. Initially, imaging was needed to support the payables department of the OBFS, replacing a legacy system that had previously been used for invoice copying to support billing. Presently, only 30 percent of the images stored in Xtender are from payables. Since its launch in 2003, the number of images managed by Xtender has grown to more than 50 million, and they span nearly every administrative function, including those within human resources and student services. While Xtender was intended as a supplemental tool for a specific workflow, it quickly became an integral component of workflows for many units. But this growth in stored data images was not expected or predicted, and so no comprehensive document management strategies or methodologies were deployed to help manage the content. The irregular application of indexing terms or use of standard file naming conventions has created management challenges that do not currently have a quick or easy solution. In particular, it will be difficult to know how and when to purge particular documents out of the system if they are linked to a specific records series scheduled for disposal. These issues, along with many others (the need for instant access to information, providing security of documents, and authentication of users, for example), underscore the need to establish policies and procedural standards and guidelines for information management. Such documentation is in effect a way to call attention to the specific bits of missing clothes from the emperor's wardrobe so when his professional shoppers return home no one will be disappointed.
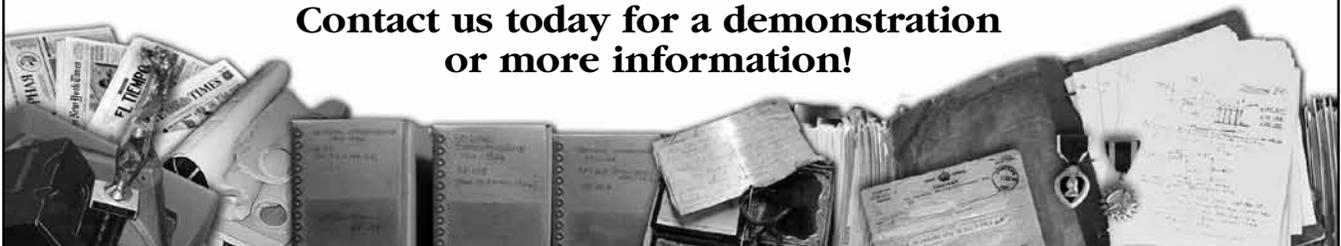
Through approaching information gathering from both the "top-down" and "bottom-up," the RIMS project has begun to achieve its original goal—to develop sustainable practices and standards for managing records and information resources, both for the OBFS and beyond. For other institutions interested in documenting current information environments from a records and information management perspective, the RIMS project methodology shows promise. Focusing on collecting information at all layers of the information landscape simultaneously is creating the traction needed to engage the right stakeholders and affect positive changes in our records and information management environment.