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The Paperless Office – Electronic Document Storage

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Overview

There are various reasons companies regardless of size may consider the transition towards a paperless, or a reduction in paper used in an office.

Technology has reduced the number of paper organisations uses in their operations. The storage of electronic documents allows for easy access to relevant documents, invoices, and records instead of manually searching for information, requesting information from the central records department if such information is located offsite. With the trend towards mobile computing, distributed offices, and home offices accessing electronic information that is part of routine business operations is important.

Electronic storage of documents allows for managed access to relevant documents and improved disaster planning. Storage space can be substantial where office space is at a premium. With the cost of technology today, it is attainable and a practical solution for even a small business, or home office. Paperless office was initially promoted as solutions for lawyers, and accountants, but has since expanded to include other professionals. An assessment of departments of the organisation that receives paper records from external sources, and generate paper

documents including filed paper documents should be back-scanned.

Some vendors already offer options to access invoices, and statements securely from their website which can assist in streamlining the process, as such documents are often in PDF format. For paper-based documents the use of a scanner will be required, the type of scanners such as a simple scanner or a high-speed scanner will depend on the volume of paper scanned. For a home office or small business, a simple scanner can be used; larger organisations may require high-speed scanners to make the task more practical. For the home office, all-in-one scanner, fax, and printers are available and may be a consideration.

Planning for the electronic documents storage

When electronic paper document storage is implemented process flows within the organisation may need to change to see the benefits of this transition. There may be some resistance to change from those are used to the old paper-based method, including the processes used. Change cannot occur overnight and will need to be transitioned to ensure that staff is well equipped, understand how to use

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the new technology effectively, as well as ensure that business operations are not negatively impacted.

Workloads of organisations don't decrease when transitioning towards an electronic document system and may result in a new system that must be learnt at the same time. Also, challenges include deciding if documents should be scanned at the start or the end of the paper process. As well considerations such as the Canadian Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA), as well as relevant provincial acts must adhere including the transmission of such documents. In paper-based documents handwritten signatures are often used, for electronic records digital signatures may be used to indicate approval(s). Without a proper transition plan, some employees may try to revert to the old regime, especially in the initial implementation phase. Processes that are realistic, clear, concise, are more likely to have buy-in from employees especially during the transition towards a new process to ensuring software is integrated, or have a practical bridging application to allow for easier access. Systems implementation should not be undertaken at traditionally busy times for an organisation as it could impact its operations.

Electronic Document Management Process Flow

A simple form of electronic document storage could be creating a folder on the hard drive to store PDF (portable document format) documents; it is not as simple as that to ensure efficient an operation in a larger office. Without an effective system to store and access documents, the system could just add a layer of complexity to the process. Document storage solutions can track the flow of records, including the movement of information if a document is signed out for review, or who has accessed the information, which can ensure that if documents are modified there are not several versions created at the same time. It can also allow for quicker turnaround time for documents to be reviewed, and subject matter experts within the organisations who may be located at different

locations examine the record. Organizations need to understand how materials currently flow within the structure to ensure that any transition towards an electronic document management system is efficient, and the benefits can be realised. The shift towards a 'paperless office' will require learning new process flows to be developed and modified per the operations of the organisation.

Before immersing an organisation into a paperless document flow, a solid plan needs to be developed. The current document flow process should be recorded from start to end. Any deficiencies, as well as any current controls, should be documented. As electronic storage space is inexpensive, an organisation will need to decide on how long information should be kept. File storage formats and file naming convention should be established. For commonly used documents within an organisation, the use of tools such as SharePoint. Depending on the usage of the document different solutions will need to be addressed and established before implementing an electronic document storage procedures and policy. Problems can occur if users are not forced to name a document a certain way or if a document located in the wrong folder problems can happen especially as the number of electronic records increases. A document management system can assist to ensure order in the storage and retrieval of information.

Specific deliverables, measurable, deadlines, and goals to be established should be defined before a process flow is developed to address the conversion of electronic documents. Internal plans including roll-out by area should be identified, recorded, and various stakeholders notified. Converting all areas of an organisation at the same time can be complex if not undertaken in phases. One such function could be accounts payable, were scanned invoices could streamline the process in allows the department to process the invoices. Tackling the first area before tackling all areas of an organisation allows a company to evaluate, and determine issues

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that need to be resolved when rolling out a process throughout the organisation.

The storage of documents may require information to encrypted including controlling access to those who may require access to particular documents. Document management software tools can be used to establish user access to document folders, group access, and track access requests to document files. An organisation could be affected by data theft if access to documents are not secure and controlled effectively not only to invoices, purchase orders, but also strategic and legal documents, research and development documents the organisation has or is currently working on.

The potential risks related to unauthorised access need to be identified, and controls established in compliance with federal, and provincial legislation as well as industry standards. A transition towards a paperless office can be beneficial to an organisation if planned and executed strategically. While a paperless office would be ideal, an organisation can benefit from transitioning key areas.

About the author:

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