My Bit: Information at your fingertips.
By Sukhdev Singh, The Week Of November 3, 2003

Document and knowledge management is not some thing new. Businesses and individuals have long used various filing and retrieval systems to retain and use their valuable "knowledge assets". As your business develops, the amount of paperwork obviously increases. A lot of it could be required for day-to-day operations. More paperwork might also be needed and documents retained to satisfy the respective regulators and government agencies. You may retain some of these for a couple of years while others might need permanent retention.

The ability to capture these knowledge assets and mining them for information, whether they are paper filings in cabinets or electronic files scattered all over your hard disk and servers, and having them available at your fingertips constitutes morphing data into knowledge.

Recent studies reveal some interesting, if disturbing, facts :

- Some 90% of corporate data and business records are paper-based;
- Roughly 7.5% of all documents get lost, 3% get misfiled;
- Professionals spend 5% to 15% of their time reading information and 50% looking for information;
- The average document gets reproduced 19 times;
- Only 10% of corporate information lies in structured databases. The remaining 90% - often critical to business processes - are found in unmanaged, chaotic file system structures; and
- In an average organisation, documents are growing at a rate of 22% per year.

The rapid proliferation of information today has increased the need for effective document management. Now that computers are common in offices, there is also an added dimension with electronic files. In most cases, all this information is usually found in an unstructured format made up of Microsoft Office documents, e-mails, drawings, faxes, printed matter, newspaper articles, memos, brochures, annual reports and so on. This unstructured data format holds huge amounts of potentially valuable information which might be overlooked as it is scattered all over the place or seems unobtainable unless laboriously re-keyed or pasted into a usable format.

Even as companies continue to digitise their information, paper is not going away and the concept of a paperless office is still far from being achieved. Just try to think of a part of your organisation which does not handle paper-based information. You will find none. There are invoices in accounting; resumés and payroll slips in personnel; standard operating procedure manuals in manufacturing; plus brochures and newspaper clippings in marketing. Paper is everywhere!

Faced with this environment, many companies are employing paper-management strategies to help them integrate paper-based documents and processes with electronic documents.

In Malaysia, AmberSoft Sdn Bhd has been spearheading the implementation of such solutions and the story is always the same for those companies needing help. They are looking for solutions to help manage and integrate paper and electronic files in order to improve efficiency. They also want to establish relationships between nuggets of data and eliminate the need to keep cross-referring to paper-based documents.

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A good example of this was when we helped out the Shah Alam Municipal Council (MBSA). The building approval division there gets a lot of applications for Certificate of Fitness (CF) approvals and site inspections. The plans and relevant documents for such procedures, numbering in the millions, are currently stored in the archival room.

Firms seeking CF clearance will submit the relevant paperwork like engineering drawings, project reports and other supporting documents to the building approval division for specific projects that they want approved. These documents then move through various officials, who will check them for authenticity and finally approve them. For site inspections, the relevant documents have to be extracted from the storage rooms for the technicians during their site visits.

We analysed MBSA's requirements and provided a combination of document management solution with a simple workflow process where files containing all the documents in their physical form are first scanned and archived and then forwarded to the relevant officers. This simple process of digitising the forms allowed MBSA to:

- Provide easy file tracking - the status of a pending file can be easily traced;
- Set reminders and deadlines - the deadlines for various project approvals could be set and automatic reminders given;
- Eliminate the huge cost of storage and maintenance of letters and documents on site;
- Have a person-independent process - even if an officer is away, someone else can take action on any file;
- Remove dependency on clerks for fetching files; and
- Grant senior management control - senior staff members can use the system to monitor and review the assignment of tasks and disposal of mails and documents.

Such a strategy is broadly labelled as an electronic document management system (EDMS). Our experience has shown that there are some basic concepts and principles of EDMS that companies need to understand before embarking on the quest to manage their information overload. We will cover this in next week's article.

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