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DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOU ARE GOING? A LOOK AT STRATEGIC PLANNING

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ABSTRACT

Strategic planning may seem to be a daunting process and just one more thing to do. The benefits of planning outweigh the time involved and help create a road map for program activities. This paper will look at the elements which go into strategic planning. By providing the steps involved and presenting resources that can be used as reference tools it will help you should you decide to start planning your program's future.

INTRODUCTION

As a consultant, I often see requests for proposal asking for a needs analysis for a RIM or an archives program. The organization wants to know how its program measures up against current best practice and how to identify gaps for future planning. The business driver might be a space concern, as in they've run out, or the senior manager to whom they report wants to prepare a division-wide long term plan and wants input about the RIM/IG program. But is a needs analysis enough? It certainly identifies the current state of the program but on its own, it is not sufficient to address the issues that come up. If you have defined a desired state, the needs analysis will identify the gaps. However, without identifying solutions to fill those gaps and the related resources budget and timelines, it's pretty difficult to reach your desired state.

There are many projects that might drive the need for a strategic plan to get the support move forward with the appropriate support, budget and resources. Examples include:

- The development and implementation of an information governance program
- Software selection and implementation

- A major office move which drives a move to an electronic workplace and digital transformation
- The need to manage electronic information which has a long-term retention in a trusted digital repository as part of a digital preservation program.

Regardless of what the objective is, the strategic plan is a roadmap of how to get there. This paper will look at how to develop a strategic plan and the supporting activities, timelines and resources.

GETTING STARTED

The plan does not stand on its own. One of the best ways to get support for any project is to identify a **Business Driver**[1] which the project will support. In the case of implementing a records and information management program, an example where a problem created an opening for an improved records management program was Pacific Gas and Electric in San Bruno, California. In this case, a gas line rupture and subsequent fire led to serious damage within the community and a lawsuit. While it was after the fact, the organization was forced to assess its records management practices and move towards improvements, as a result of the gaps in the program.

Your own organization's defined direction provides an opportunity to support the business through improved records and information management. *Enhanced customer service* is one area in which the program can be shown to improve access to information in order to respond to customer enquiries in a timely fashion. If systems are clogged with old, outdated information, that result in slow response time, creating a disposition process to get rid of ROT will improve response times to customer requests.

Positioning the program to support the business direction will facilitate the planning process.

The Business Case[2]

It's impossible, in today's workplace, to undertake activities and get resources without senior management commitment and support. In order to get that support, you may need to have a business case that shows the costs and benefits of undertaking your project, in this case creating the strategic plan.

The main reason for creating the business case is to sell your project (in this, case the strategic plan) to senior management to get their commitment, together with the budget and resources necessary. The business case documents the reason and justification for the

[1] Business driver is a generic term that can be used in any organization to look at what it sees as its core focuses. The plan can then be focused to support that "driver".

[2] https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives-sector/finding-funding/how-to-fundraise/3-building-networks-and-cultivating-support/building-a-business-case/
https://www.guelphpl.ca/en/about-us/resources/Documents/Accessible-Documents/Reports-and-Publications/Final-Report-Jan-24-vFNL-FINAL-ua.pdf

project and will outline the proposed costs, the financial and economic impacts and the benefits, risks and value the project brings to the organization's operations.

Building a business case is an activity unto itself so while it is not part of this paper there are links to examples of business cases that you can refer to should you need to. You may be fortunate to have funds in the budget that will cover the cost of the strategic plan and therefore not need to do a business case. A lot depends on your organization and the availability of resources and funds.

Defining Your Future Vision

Having a vision statement may seem somewhat unnecessary but if you are sharing information with stakeholders and staff, it's helpful to have a high level, short and sweet definition of where you want to be in the future. The vision statement sets a framework for moving forward.

The University of Toronto's iSchool vision is documented as:

- International excellence in research and education in Information.

Enterprising Warehouse Solutions provides consultancies on data management and planning. The VP of Education and Chief Methodologist, Anne Marie Smith, provides an example of a Data management vision:

- To ensure world-class integrity and understanding of this organization's information policies, practices, processes, and standards to support the organization, its customers, and its partners in the achievement of their business objectives.[3]

A simple RIM program vision might state:

- ABC's records and information on all media will be available, captured, managed and disposed to meet organizational needs.

In each case, the vision is a simple, clear articulation of a future state. They do not state *how* this will be done.

[3] Developing a Mission for Data Governance. Anne-Marie Smith, PhD, EWSolutions.com https://www.ewsolutions.com/data-management-university/

Creating a Strategic Plan

To start with, what is a strategic plan?

- It is a systematic process of envisioning a desired future, creating a vision, and translating it into broadly defined goals and objectives and a sequence of steps to achieve them[4].

Let's imagine you are part of a large organization, which has offices in each province across Canada. Your RIM program has been in place for 10 years and each time a change takes place in the company, you react and do the best you can to address the myriad of RIM issues that come up. That's the way it's always been.

Recently the organization has decided it is time to implement an Information Governance (IG) program and you have been asked to head the planning team. Where do you start?

One approach is to create a strategic plan to present to senior management which outlines what is required to move from a RIM program to an organization-wide IG program. The strategy helps you:

- Identify where you are currently and any gaps that require action
- Define activities, resources, and timelines to get from your current state to the desired state
- Create a document which can be used to sell the idea, get buy in and measure your progress.

In reality, this planning process should be ongoing, and the plan should be regularly updated to show what progress you are making and redefine what is still to be done. It is not just a one-time effort.

Managing the Strategic Plan Project

Typically developing a strategy from the bottom up, as in, I think it's a good idea so I'll go out and start it, is not the best way to go. First, you will need assistance from people across the organization. Do you have the authority to get them to co-operate? Senior management has to understand the project and its goals and objectives so that you get a budget and resources. Project oversight is also important, so a first step is to create a steering committee, made up of key senior business stakeholders across the organization who will open doors for you and provide final sign off on documentation as required. Ideally, the steering committee will be chaired by someone who will act as a champion for you in moving

[4] www.Businessdictionary.com/definition/strategic-planning.html

things forward at the top. This group oversees the high-level decisions and signs off on decisions/reports, etc.

Depending on how big the organization is, resources you have in your own department and the number of departments you will be working with, you might also want to create a second committee. This committee is more of a hands-on, working committee of individuals who represent the business units and who know the processes and procedures in those areas so that as you are doing interviews, gathering information or doing follow ups, you have a go-to person to work with to make sure you reach the right people.

These committees are active throughout the various steps of creating the plan. The frequency of meetings will depend on the scope and length of the process.

Defining the High Level Steps

As you go through planning process there are a series of steps to follow which proceed in a logical order:

- Gathering Information about the current situation within the organization
- Analyzing the information so that you can identify gaps that need to be filled and create recommendations about what needs to be done to attain your vision
- Preparing a report which outlines the findings, recommendations, resources required to implement the activities, proposed costs and timelines to complete the activities

Data Collection and Documenting the Current State

Assessing the Current State

The first step is to understand where you are right now. And the information you review and gather depends a lot on the plan you are developing. If you are doing a plan for your overall program it might include gathering information about:

- What policies and procedures are in place? Are they up to date?
- When was the last time your retention schedule was updated?
- Are all staff aware of and implementing the program?
- What background documentation exists about the organization, its mandate and its direction/future plan?
- What is the current mandate of the program? Does it cover all information, regardless of the media?
- Are you providing training on the program? How far along are you with a RIM software solution? Are your electronic records under control?
- Do you have enough space for administration and storage?

The types of question you ask will depend on the information you need in order to develop your plan.

Tools to Gather Information

Once you have reviewed the various documents about the organization, including policies and procedures, etc. it's time to talk to people within the organization, and outside if you have public-facing activities. The information can be captured through:

- individual interviews
- focus groups
- online questionnaires such as survey monkey

The "who" and what you want to learn often determines the best approach. As we know from our time in the pandemic, meeting in person is not necessary now that we have access to such tools as Zoom and Teams.

One note of caution in this phase of the information gathering – one size does not fit all! Depending on the individual and their position within the company, the information you want to obtain will vary. The types of questions you pose will depend on the particular reason for developing the strategy.

Early on in my consulting career I was told by a senior executive that you need a 45 second elevator speech to get across your message because executives are busy people and cannot spend an hour listening to you while you explain what you want. The same is true in this type of situation. Keep the interview short, sweet and to the point if you are dealing with senior management.

Staff within the organization might use this as a great opportunity to provide that input they've wanted to share and will be prepared to give more time to the interviews.

If you have a large number of people from whom you want to gather simple yes or no answers, an automated survey tool is useful.

Who Do You Gather Information From?

One of the most important aspects of the data gathering is to identify those people with whom you have regular contact. There are likely some key people from whom it is critical to get input. It is important to understand what people do in their day to day jobs how they interact with the program on a regular basis and understand how the area you are looking at for planning purposes affects them.

For example, you may be defining a plan for selecting and implementing a software solution. Knowing how information is created, shared, managed and stored across the organization is a primary consideration. Users and IT staff would be key participants from who to get input.

You probably know what the issues are and could sit down and provide a list off the top of your head. But in order to get support and buy-in, other people have to confirm what you already know. They might also have some valuable insights to where improvements could be made. Talking to people across the organization ensures that you understand their requirements and ensures their input has contributed to your planning. The development of the plan is an opportunity to market the program.

There will be different levels of people to whom you speak about their "wish list" for the future for which you are planning. Depending on the area you are planning for, you might want to speak to:

- Your own departmental staff and partners
- Senior management
- Users of your services: internal business user or external clients
- Key stakeholders who have a vested interest in the program. It might include Legal Counsel, Privacy officers, IT and other business partners

In one organization we met with all staff members in functional groups. In another we met with representatives of different business functions in several locations. Individual interviews may be required, depending on the person and his/her responsibilities. The information you want will help determine who should be contacted and how the information can be gathered.

One thing to keep in mind is that this is an exercise in thinking outside the box. You may have tried a variety of things in the past to move forward and run into roadblocks. Those people who were not supportive or were the nay sayers may have past experiences that colour their view of what you are planning for. So, look at this process as an opportunity to renew discussions, allow them to get their beefs out on the table and address them. People like to have their opinions heard and sometimes those same people can turn out to be your biggest allies. If you don't understand why they have the opinions they do, you can't address them so it's a no win when you have to deal with them.

The SWOT Analysis

You'll often hear people talk about a SWOT analysis:

- Strengths
- Weaknesses

- Opportunities
- Threats

The SWOT analysis can be part of individual interviews or undertaken in a focus group session as part of your assessment of the current state of the program. It might involve a group of people from one department or from a variety of business functions and staff levels across the organization. And sometimes you may not like what you hear. The main objective is to brainstorm about:

- Where you do things well (strengths)
- Where you could do things better (weaknesses)
- What opportunities are out there for you to move forward, make changes, etc., and
- Are you facing obstacles in the program that might turn into negatives for you?

As the discussion takes place, someone should be taking notes about the comments and tracking the discussion, which may, despite your best intentions, cross some of the themes, just by the nature of thoughts jumping around.

I've found that despite the fact it's old technology, flip charts, which capture the thoughts around each of the themes, are a simple way of documenting feedback. If you are using a laptop you'd want to be able to share the screen so that everyone can see how the ideas are flowing.
At the end of the session you can prioritize and capture all the feedback so that you can define a series of key points to help you build on in your planning phase.

There are many resources that show how to carry out a SWOT analysis and some references are provided at the end of the paper.

Benchmarking

Benchmarking[5] is another useful tool to compare your program/situation with other similar organizations. Having said that, it's important to be prepared for the feedback and know what might happen. We had to do an organizational review some years ago and were asked, as part of it, to contact other similar organizations. It turned out that we were the only ones to have a records management program! I will let you think about the outcome. Interestingly, not long after we did our benchmarking and the RIM program was disbanded, the government enacted legislation that resulted in all those same organizations (including ours) having to establish their RM programs. And life goes on!!

[5] **https://planning.curtin.edu.au/local/docs/Guide_to_Benchmarking_Oct2007.pdf**

In a benchmarking exercise, you are gathering information from similar organizations about different aspects of their program activities including what they do and how they do it; number of staff; space allocated to their program; software solutions, etc. If their program involves inactive records storage you might ask how much space they have and what services they offer.

You may want to have a survey form and actually talk to your counterparts in person, or on a video call. If you use that approach it is wise to send the questions out ahead of time, so that they are prepared. Alternatively, using a tool such as Survey Monkey allows you to create an online survey, which can be sent them directly. Regardless of the approach, it is important to provide the context for the benchmarking and provide them with an introduction to the process.

The simpler the survey form, the easier it is for the respondents to provide feedback and for you to compile the answers. If it appears too long, it may just go unanswered. One way to encourage participants to answer is by offering to send the completed results out to them. If you do decide to do that, you will have to get permission from each of the contributors to share their data.

Once you receive the results back, you have to compile the responses in a way that makes comparing your organization with the feedback easy to understand. Providing a table of the key areas you want to emphasize is often easiest so that the reader is not wading through pages and pages of survey questions and answers.

Capturing Your Findings and Creating Recommendations

At this point you have completed your interviews, done the SWOT analysis, and gathered the benchmarking surveys. The next step is to consolidate all the information and compile the findings so that you can identify the gaps and create supporting recommendations. For example the findings might show that:

- People within the organization do not understand what Records and Information Management or Information Governance are
- Other organizations have more staff than you do in a program that is similar to yours
- There is no up to date classification scheme and retention schedule and no metadata scheme exists
- Office 365 exists across the organization but there are no information management strategies in place, so information exists in silos and people are creating their own personal libraries.
- Inactive paper records are stored off-site and retention schedules have not been applied to them

- Policies and procedures have not been updated to reflect the need to manage information on all media

These are obviously not all the possible findings. Once you have reviewed the findings and drawn your conclusions about what is required, you will create a series of recommendations on steps to be taken to move forward.

Measuring Against Accepted Standards

Having summarized all the findings, you have a good sense of the current state and where there are gaps in the program.

It's always useful to be able to reference external standards and guidelines about RIM and IG programs to look at where you are compared to best practice. Some of the resources which can be used include:

- ISO 15489-1, second edition: 2016-04-15
- ARMA Principles and other standards
- CGSB electronic records standard
- Legislation and Regulations with which your organization must comply
- Software standards such as DoD5015.2 and NARA's Universal Electronic Records Management Requirements[6]

ISO 15489-1, second edition: 2016-04-15, Information and documentation, records management; Part 1, concepts and Principles, is an excellent starting place to look at best practice programs. It outlines what *should* be in place. It outlines the key elements of a program, so provides a starting point to identify what you are doing and not doing.   The standard addresses:

- Records and record systems
- Policies and responsibilities
- Appraisal
- Records Controls and
- Processes for creating, capturing and managing records

Each section is supported by a subsection of activities outlining the activities to be undertaken.

As a basis for reviewing your program, you can determine which elements are currently in place and how well you are complying with them. Where there are gaps, you have an opportunity to define a set of activities to ensure that your plan addresses those gaps. That then helps you define your plan, with resources and timelines.

[6] https://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/policy/universalermrequirements

The ARMA Principles are another excellent tool to reference in order to identify your program activities[7].

A number of years ago, Pacific Gas and Electric had a major gas pipeline rupture and fire and the consultants[8] who undertook the assessment of the RIM program used the ARMA Record Keeping principles Information Maturity model to assess the RIM program. They identified key components of a successful records management program and assessed how Pacific Gas and Electric's recordkeeping practices against ARMA's International's Information Maturity Model. In a very concise way, the spreadsheet shows where the gaps existed.

Table 7-1: PG&E Gas Transmission Division's Information Maturity prior to the San Bruno Pipeline rupture and fire, based upon GARP® Principles

GARP® Assessment Criteria Records Management Theme	Accountability	Compliance	Transparency	Availability	Integrity	Protection	Retention	Disposition
Strategy	1.5	1.5	-	-	-	-	-	-
Responsibilities	1.5	1.5	1	1	1	1	1	1
Training	-	1	-	1	-	1	1	1
Policies, Standards, Procedures	1	-	-	2	-	-	-	-
Records Retention	1.5	1	1	1	1	1	2.5	2
Business Continuity & Vital Records	-	1	-	-	1	2.5	-	-
Records Management Processes	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.5	1.5
Records Management Storage	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.5	1.5
Technology	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.5	1.5
Average Maturity Score (1-5)	1.2	1.1	1.0	1.1	1.0	1.2	1.5	1.4

Figure 7-1: PG&E's position on the GARP® Information Maturity Model

In this case, the assessment was to support a legal trial against PG and E. The findings, along with other reports were submitted to court. Needless to say, the findings were taken seriously and the record-keeping practices addressed.

Once you have completed the current assessment, it's time to look at where you want to be in three to five years, identify the gaps between where you are and that desired state, and determine what activities are required to get from point "A" to point "B".

Standards that define software requirements provide a basis for software selection and in some cases, show which vendors have been certified against the particular standard. These are useful tools as starting points for your own requirements.

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[7] https://www.arma.org/page/principles
https://www.arma.org/page/PrinciplesMaturityModel

[8] Dr. Paul Duller and Alison North wrote their 172 page report entitled Records Management within the Gas Transmission of Pacific Gas and Electric Company, Prior to the Natural Gas Transmission Rupture and Fire, San Bruno, California, September 9, 2010

Defining the Proposed Activities

Having completed the information gathering and done some comparisons with the standards, you have likely identified five or six key areas that represent the major areas for further development. These might include:

- Policies, procedures, standards
- Creating guidance to managing information in Office 365
- Selecting and implementing a software solution
- Space considerations
- Digital continuity and preservation
- Training and program monitoring

Each of these major categories needs to be broken down into a series of activities with timelines and resource requirements.

As an example, let’s look at selecting and implementing software. One of the biggest challenges we face in RIM and IG is that the software vendors change the names of what they are selling as fast as the market creates a new buzz word and as technology evolves. Once upon a time records management and document management software solutions were two separate solutions. Over time the functionality merged and we got EDRMS solutions. Then content management came onto the scene, until Electronic Information Management systems replaced them and we now have content servers. What is the key message? Understand what you need the software to do, do your research into what’s out there and ignore what it’s called today.

There are several resources mentioned earlier that can provide an introduction to specific software requirements. Why use them? While they may be more complex than your requirements, they have been defined by experts to address the various aspects of managing electronic information and are an excellent starting point for your research, rather than you having to start from scratch. You can also look at research companies such as Gartner and Forrester to learn what they have to say about the current state of EIM software solution

In developing the set of activities, these are the key areas you might think about in selecting the software. At the same time, you must document who will do all this and how long it might take.

No	Activity	Responsible	Time Required
1	Review any existing standards that might assist in defining your requirements and define requirements	RIM/IG Designate(s)	1 week
2	Research the vendors and what their products have to offer	RIM/IG Designate(s)	1 week
3	If you have an opportunity to go beyond Office 365, which many of us don't these days, define what you want the software to do and the environment in which it has to operate	RIM/IG Designate(s)	1 week
4	Create an RFP and select the vendors you want to send it to. As part of the RFP you might want to detail the functionality you want, giving an idea of what is a "must have" versus a "nice to have".	RIM/IG Designate(s)	2 weeks
5	Review the responses to the RFP and determine which companies you would like to have demonstrate their products; Review products	RIM/IG Project Team	3 weeks
6	Select the software and finalize the contract with the vendor	RIM/IG Designate(s)	1 week

This is an example of how to define the activities in the first phase of the software implementation process. Once you have selected the software, you have a separate set of activities to plan around the implementation across the organization. The example shows how you have identified the need for a software solution and created a series of activities to get from point A to point B.

Each key area that you have identified as a gap and priority will require a series of supporting recommendations and activities, as outlined in the software example above.

All the activities cannot be undertaken at once, so the best way to approach the planning is to determine if there are any areas of risk, priorities and quick hits where activities can be undertaken immediately to get big results. There will be activities which are dependent upon other activities, without which they cannot be started. For example, if part of your plan is to manage your records through a software solution, you need to have your classification scheme and retention schedule in place, together with an approved metadata model. The software does not, contrary to popular belief, come with everything done for you! Are your policies and procedures in place? If not, then it will be difficult to create a staff training program.

Another aspect of the plan is to consider how long it might take to undertake each activity. A timeline is critical to create realistic expectations from all involved in the project. Just because senior management thinks digital transformation is a great idea, has read all about it in the latest CEO magazine and calls you in to get started on it, it's not happening overnight. There is a need to understand and define

- where it should be implemented to get the biggest benefit and minimize risk
- what processes will change
- what equipment and software to select,
- what new processes to create and
- what areas to train people on.

Creating the Report and Defining Implementation Steps

Writing a report, like preparing an article, takes practice and some thought. Writing out a stream of ideas that make perfect sense to you is not necessarily going to get your message across. You have to think of your audience and the message you are trying to get across. It's not about showing how much research you've done, it's getting someone to buy in to what you want to achieve. Not everyone needs all the background details. Many times I've been told to make the key points in an Executive Summary because that is the part that senior management will look at. If that summary contains anything they are interested in, they will drill down into the relevant parts. The report itself outlines

- How you gathered the data
- What the findings and conclusions are
- What gaps exist that need to be addressed
- Recommendations about next steps

- An implementation plan which looks at each recommendation and defines
    - Who plays what role and has responsibility for oversight and implementation
    - What is the timing for implementation– how long might it take?
    - When does it start and finish?
    - Is it dependent on anything else being completed before it can be started?
    - How many people will be involved in implementing each recommendation?
    - What will the cost be, based on salaries, equipment, etc.?
    - What are the proposed timelines and milestones?

Given that you are creating a strategic plan, the activities will be prioritized and cover a period of time. In looking at the recommendations, it's obvious that some things can be done fairly quickly and may have an immediate impact which will show the benefit of the project. If you are implementing a software solution, doing a pilot project might provide insights into user acceptance, how long it takes to do your data analysis and clean up shared files, what is required to create a metadata model, etc.

The report typically includes a series of appendices which provide details about the findings from such things as interviews and benchmarking.

There are as many approaches to presenting the plan as there are plans themselves. The Calgary Board of Education (CBE) began a process to reinvent its records management program in 2010. Its Records Management Timeline, which was supported by a detailed document outlining the steps, provided a high-level image of planned activities and its 2017 timeline[9] shows which activities have been completed (milestones) and the timelines for other activities.

The City of Guelph contracted with Ergo Information Management Consulting to develop a strategic plan for its records management program in 2015. It is an excellent example of a final report and strategy. In preparing this article I contacted both Sheila Taylor at Ergo and the city's Corporate Information Management group to get permission to reference the plan. Jennifer Slater, Manager, Information, Privacy and Elections/Deputy City Clerk wrote back saying:

> It has certainly been invaluable to us over the years as we move our program forward.

Your plan is going to present your findings and identify your approach to moving forward over time, the resources required and the expected outcomes. It serves as an ongoing reference to point to monitor your progress and should be updated on a regular basis.

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[9] **https://cbe.ab.ca/about-us/board-of-trustees/trusteepublicdocuments/corporate-records-management-program-high-level-timeline.pdf#search=records%20management**

Conclusion

Planning is an important part of any program development. Developing a strategic plan takes time and resources. It provides you with a roadmap that can be used to document what is required to move forward in areas that have been identified through a structured process.

There are so many aspects of a RIM/IG program that require planning. During my consulting career I have worked on developing strategies for implementing an EDRMS solution; creating and implementing an organization-wide RIM program; defining future space and staffing requirements for RIM and IG programs. Each requires a vision of where the organization wants to be, a review of the current state through a needs assessment which identifies the gaps between where the organization is and wants to be and the plan of how to get there.

Detailing a strategy for each of them in one article is difficult so I have attempted to provide some steps at a general level. I have included, in the endnotes, some resources and actual plans which are in the public domain to give you some insights into the planning process. The next step is for you to get started.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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