

CEP Magazine – July 2022

Preventing employees from hoarding electronic documents

By Mark Diamond

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Many companies today worry about how much paper information they are accumulating, but employees' habits of hoarding electronic documents represent a bigger risk. While some of these electronic documents are records or have business value, much of the emails and files that employees save are either expired records, duplicative, or simply older documents with little or no business value. Every year more and more electronic information accumulates on desktops, file shares, and many other official and nonofficial repositories. This ongoing accumulation represents increased risk and cost. The risk of unmanaged privacy, intellectual property, and other sensitive information compounds data storage and discovery costs. Yet attempts to prevent employees hoarding or increase electronic efficiency often fail.

Hoarding behavior is a learned habit

People develop habits over years and sometimes decades. Electronic storage of files and emails is second nature. Desktops, file shares, cloud locations, and offline email PST files are all subsumed digital oases of information. Moving this electronic information to the cloud does not stop—but often facilitates—more hoarding. This creates a culture where data accumulation is accepted. And organizational culture and employee behavior, once established, takes considerable effort to change. Just telling employees to change typically does not work. Nor does simply threatening them that they need to adapt to a new process. You can have the best policies and technologies, but if employees are not using them, all is for naught. When organizations effectively apply change management, even stodgy, disinterested, or recalcitrant business groups will get on board.

Create a modern and compliant records retention schedule

Companies need a better approach to records management led by a modern, compliant, and easier-to-execute records retention schedule. At the highest level, a good schedule provides the foundation for an effective records and information governance program. A modern schedule not only drives compliance, but also saves time and effort on downstream discovery, privacy, disposition, and other compliance initiatives. Most important, it can be a boon for the business, making high-value information more accessible and easier to share.

While the hardest part of a new program is that first step, if that step is done correctly, the rest of the process is much easier to complete. A records retention policy provides overall guidance on the management of records in an organization. A policy has three primary purposes:

1. It defines records and nonrecords, including short-term working documents, and states that records must be kept for the duration of the retention period listed in the records retention schedule;
2. It states that once a record's or working document's retention period has expired, it must be destroyed;
and

3. In the event of a legal hold, the policy and retention schedule are suspended for the records under the hold.

Typically, a schedule is an addendum to the policy. The policy gives force and effect to the schedule. It states that records must be kept according to the retention requirements of the schedule. The schedule is effectively a reference to an organization's records with information on how long those records must be kept.

Why it is better to talk to employees than send out surveys

During our engagements with clients, we have found that conducting employee interviews is much better than simply sending out surveys, albeit interviews may take longer. Surveys may tell you the “what,” while interviews tell you the “why.” Surveys uncover surface-level information, as well as the pain both employees and their business units are experiencing: “We are drowning in emails,” or, “I spend hours every week looking for information.” By uncovering this information, we can guide employees to change behaviors, leading to better information management, which makes employees' lives easier, allowing them easier search, access, and collaboration. There's a “win” for employees here, and we can use this pain to drive our initiative. The challenge with these types of surveys is that the quality of data tends to be poor. Many survey recipients either ignore the survey or answer the questions in a cursory manner. Response rates from employees who carefully read through the survey and diligently answer the questions tends to be low (between 3% and 6%). Sending more surveys to more employees can generate more responses and a lot of data points, but the overall quality of the data remains low.

The most effective data collection technique is through a series of either one-on-one or small-group interviews. These interviews should take less than an hour and target a small set of employees spanning a wide variety of functions. The data quality from these discussions tends to be very high yielding; good records are received and created. Perhaps most important is that the employees feel “heard,” which increases the likelihood that the policy will be followed.

Use the five-second rule to save information in the right place

The past 10 years have seen a shift from manually oriented records management processes. The problem with manual processes is that they bump up against the five-second rule. The average employee sends and receives 167 emails and more than 25 files each day. We find that employees will spend at most five seconds manually classifying a single document, and even that short period of time works out to more than an hour per week per employee to classify information. If the manual records classification and management process takes longer, even well-meaning employees will soon start blowing off the process. Manual classification worked better in a world of paper, but the sheer volume of the electronic documents that employees touch each day has led many companies to adopt an easier data placement strategy.

Another important concept to understand is that your initial objective should not necessarily be deletion; it should be control. Specifically, processes and technology can be applied to allow control of all this accumulated information. This control may include putting email in a cloud-based system such as Microsoft 365 or other type of content management system. Key to control is centralizing deletion. Few employees will delete information on an ongoing basis. We have found it far more effective to centralize deletion through technology. Centralizing deletion also allows organizations to suspend deletion for affected custodians in the event of legal hold.

Older, unneeded records ‘fade away’ with automated disposition

While modern programs are good at saving the right information, they are even better at getting rid of expired records and low-value business information.

Organizations should routinely delete unnecessary or expired information. Making disposition repeatable and consistent are the pillars of a defensible records program. We advise that companies struggling with defensible disposition start by forming a cross-functional team to examine current information management and legal response processes. Establish communication among the legal, records management, and information technology (IT) departments, as well as executives and end users. Everyone must think beyond traditional processes to see the value of a defensible disposition program. Identify the business's pain points so that you can explain—as specifically as possible—how defensible disposition and managed retention programs will yield measurable benefits. For example, consider hard cost savings, such as postponing storage expenditures, as well as soft cost savings, such as reducing the amount of time spent by employees searching for information or working through litigation holds. Having a cross-functional team in place will help you portray the program as a win for all stakeholders.

Employee behavior change management is a must

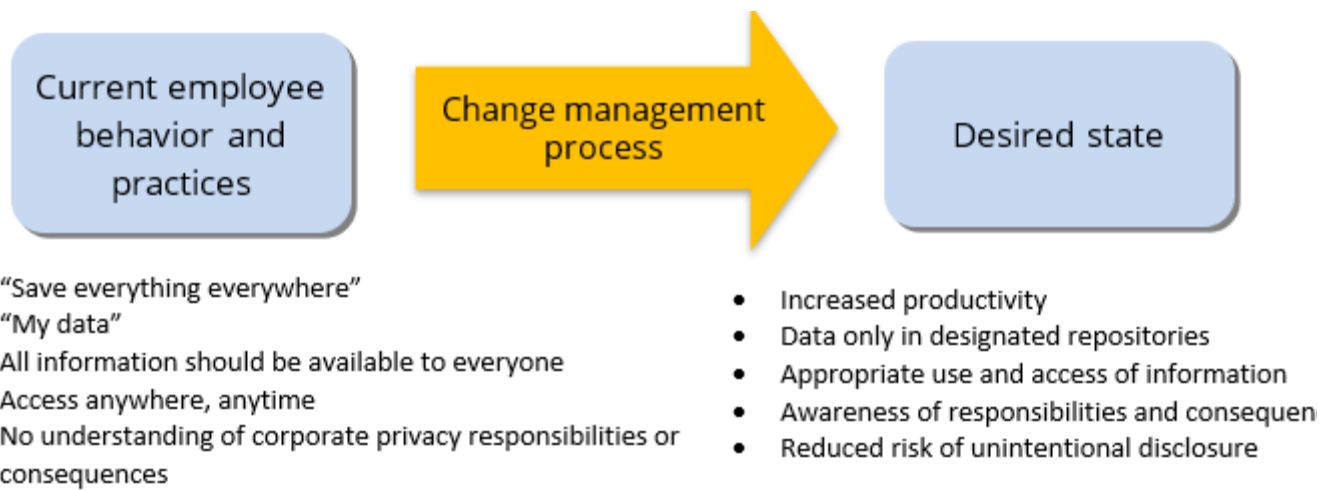
The need to defensibly dispose of information is clear. Why is it so difficult for companies to proceed with confidence? There are several common roadblocks, one of them being employee resistance. Employee resistance is one of the biggest obstacles to implementing a defensible disposition program. In some cases, employees have little or no training or guidance on the rules and procedures for proper document classification. This can create a lack of confidence on behalf of the employee: “I might get in trouble if I misclassify this document and it turns out to be a business record.” Training, buy-in, and employee behavior change management is needed to overcome this roadblock.

Information governance change management is similar to, but different, than traditional IT change management. IT change management focuses on the impact and adoption of new systems and applications. Information governance change management is about impacting and measuring the change in users' behaviors. The objective of information governance change management is in effect changing the culture of employee document hoarding.

Effective change management starts with understanding current behavior. Why are your employees saving documents? In some cases, the answer is that they are driven simply by a mentality of needing this later. But in many cases, this may be a minority driver. In our interviews with clients, we have found that employees are often driven to hoard by a number of seemingly legitimate business reasons:

- Business requests: “I was told by my boss I had to save this.”
- Conflicting messages: “Legal says we have to save all contracts in an MSG file.”
- Ongoing business processes: “This is part of our trouble ticket process.”

Their answers may surprise you.



We advise that both records programs and larger information governance programs engage a variety of groups across the organization. While one group—often legal—may own the development of the policy and schedule, they should work with other key stakeholders and get input from many business groups. This involvement is both for the practical purposes of developing an informed schedule, as well as to build consensus early in the process on what to save and not save. When engaging and recruiting other stakeholders to assist in schedule development, focus on the benefits the schedule will provide to each stakeholder. Consider stakeholder and other employee pain points and the risks inherent in their daily work, and propose individual benefits provided by better management of records. Change management is a formal discipline that combines messaging, communication, training, and auditing to get employees to follow a new process. When organizations effectively apply change management, even stodgy, disinterested, or recalcitrant business groups will get onboard. Change management has several different components, including a message and communications strategy, training, pilot and rollout, and audit.

Communication, communication, communication

Technology and process by themselves are not enough. Eliminating hoarding also requires a communications strategy coupled with a training program. Here is where the pain uncovered from the interviews becomes helpful. Employees often hate size-based mailbox quotas. Moving to an email archiving system may permit time-based retention. Time-based retention drives greater short-term retention but is much more effective in medium- and longer-term disposition. We have found that companies with email archiving systems that have adopted time-based retention strategies with automated expiration typically have fewer emails than those with mailbox quotas. In other words, embracing time-based limits and not size-based limits drives down hoarding. Users will like this, and your communications strategy should highlight the “end of email jail!” Promote these messages through a visible and frequent campaign in posters, webinars, lunch and learns, etc. Get the word out there.

Core to a change management strategy is developing messaging that will resonate with employees. While legal and other groups may have the authority to mandate document retention and disposition, these programs are much more successful when they communicate the value of these programs to employees. Good records management not only drives compliance, but it also increases employee productivity and collaboration. In moving records from file shares and other unmanaged areas to better-governed content management systems such as SharePoint, employees have better productivity tools at their disposal. Some “wins” for employees under these updated records program include:

- Having full search capability,

- Keeping documents organized the way you work,
- Sharing valuable content easily,
- Being able to easily locate the most current version,
- Not worrying about what data needs to be kept with automated disposition,
- Using a mobile device for certain types of information,
- Having valuable information available and not lost in the clutter, and
- Not worrying if a laptop crashes or a mobile device is lost or stolen.

Records management training and rollout should be based on these types of messages.

Some of the key steps in getting employees to accept and use the changes include:

- Developing a communications and training plan,
- Creating communications and training content, and
- Training employees.

Conclusion

So, what type of results can you expect? One of our clients was successful in defensibly disposing of 45 million email messages (65%) on their first iteration. Another client quickly reduced 50% of their unstructured data. This deletion was legally defensible, occurred because they followed behavior change management strategies, and garnered zero employee complaints. Creating a modern and compliant records retention schedule is needed to achieve these results. It is crucial to communicate with employees and have the buy-in from key stakeholders from the beginning to ensure effective management of electronic documents. Change management requires effort and takes time, but done correctly, it really works and can have a substantial impact on the habit of hoarding.

Takeaways

- Employees' hoarding behavior both drives noncompliance and hurts productivity.
- Changing behavior requires an alternative approach.
- Talking to employees is more effective than just sending out surveys.
- Key stakeholders are crucial for buy-in and ensuring effective management.
- Effective messaging will drive change: Communication, communication, communication.

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