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MANAGING RECORDS IN MULTIPLE REPOSITORIES

The gorilla in the room is compliance. Or maybe it's a giant octopus, spreading out tentacles in every direction to suck in documents for a court case or a government audit. How can you make sure this octopus reaches every possible piece of information that is needed, from every possible repository? Faced with this situation, how can you protect your records management program from being noncompliant, as well as from the high cost of doing multiple searches into separate repositories or disparate content silos?

The answer to this situation is called enterprise records compliance by some or federated records management by others. Its proponents say that one universally managed system would be best, a system in which records are managed centrally but left in their native repositories. The benefits, according to Judith Lamont, Ph.D, writing in KM World, May 1, 2008, are that records stay where they are and are virtualized so they can be put under retention rules or put on hold when necessary. Most companies have records, both paper and electronic, scattered in several locations, and find it is not feasible to get such records relocated into one place.

This, then, seems to be a good, centralized solution. However, in addition to the pressure of compliance and discovery, there is also the necessity of dealing day to day with documents in both electronic and physical form as to retention and disposition, and possibly the need for migration. Although electronic documents are universal now, there are many documents that must be produced and retained on paper, such as signed contracts or certain legal recordings, even though they can be converted to electronic images.

So how many repositories are we talking about?
In 2005 AIIM conducted an Industry Watch Survey which showed that 54 percent of respondents had six or more repositories. As explained by vendor MDY (now merged with

CA Records Manager), repository systems can include email, archiving, document management, extranets, imaging and content management.

In contrast to these general categories, there can be separate departmental repositories with very specific functions that enable a department to do its work. Obvious examples are systems for accounting or other financial functions with repositories that are not easily blended into a single system. It is not always feasible for an organization to break down and replace these content silos because the process is disruptive to business. Furthermore, a company that plans to grow by merging with another entity, or acquiring it outright, knows that such corporate actions will bring a new crop of repositories into the picture with an enlarged need for enterprise-wide control (www.ibm.com/software/data/cm/mgr/rm, Managing Electronic Records Across the Enterprise").

What is the main benefit of centralized management?
"The major driver is compliance," according to Craig Rhinehart, director of compliance and discovery for products and markets at IBM ECM. But a beneficial side effect may be cost savings from not having to maintain multiple repositories. Although one benefit of federated management is being able to leave records within an established repository while also making them part of the centralized system, there are times when migration is necessary. If an organization wants to reduce its number of repositories, it may choose to migrate records to a central location. Sometimes records must be migrated

because their native repository cannot accept and accommodate a necessary records management policy.

Two frequently-mentioned selling points for enterprise-wide compliance or federated management are the ability to do a discovery search across all repositories to find relevant records, and to search all repositories for records which have reached their disposition date, regardless of location, regardless of media, so that they do not become liabilities.

Another benefit identified by Reed E. Irvin, vice-president for product management at CA Records Manager, is that information now existing in a non-managed way can be brought into the fold and, if appropriate, classified as records which may prove to have business value.

Unified vs. Federated—what's the track record for each?

It's point/counterpoint for managing information as evinced in two recent articles on ARMA's web site, available for free. Reed E. Irvin (see above) wrote "Getting from Point A to Point B: What It Means to Take a Federated Approach" (www.arma.org/ imm/MayJune2009). Coming back with other information, consultant Preston W. Shimer, FAI, wrote "Unified vs. Federated: Which Has the Proven Track Record for Managing Information?" (www.arma.org/ imm/ NovDec2009.

Reed states that the term "federation" is actually a method by which applications talk to other applications. In the information management world, the term is used for the ability to access information and communicate between disparate content silos, to have it "governable under one umbrella."

In Reed's view, a federated solution "should help an organization accomplish and stay ahead of the Electronic Discovery Reference Model, the standard for e-discovery. To do this, the organization must be able to find information immediately with a search that is total and accurate. This provides "the right information to the right people at the right time" to make critical business decisions.

Preston W. Shimer's article addresses the unified approach and the federated approach. The unified approach establishes a central repository where all records are retained, managed, referenced, and disposed of in accordance to retention and disposition requirements. In Shimer's graphics, three circles represent business units, each creating records and using them to achieve objectives, operating under a schedule that determines which records are to be sent to the central repository, and which can be kept briefly at the business unit and then disposed. All records move toward the unified repository.

To define the federated approach, he quotes Judith Lamont (see second paragraph of this article.) Here the three business units create records and retain all e-documents. Each unit sends index information to the control center and repository. E-docs are kept according to retention policies and are disposed when directed by the control center. The federated index is used to search throughout the network and retrieve information.

What are the disadvantages of each?

The unified approach, which is historically old, has this disadvantage. It relies on human judgment to declare a document is a record, and that related supportive papers should or should not accompany the record. Because the numbers and costs of human workers are obvious, they are susceptible to budget cuts while the benefits of good records management are not measured.

Conversely, the federated approach is viewed as technology that will recognize documents that are being created anywhere, and will set rules for retention and disposition with no help from humans. Federated technology will use software algorithms to determine a document has become a record. The overall goal is to automate the human judgment and discipline that can make recordkeeping work properly.

In Shimer's view, the federated approach does not have a track record and thus is viewed as a "project" that will reduce payroll costs and have a future payback. He states that problems begin during implementation when it becomes obvious that this complex organizational undertaking requires myriad instances of judgment and discipline that cannot be performed by computers.

That said, technology for records and information management keeps hurtling forward to solve the problems of both the unified and federal approaches. Talk to your storage provider to get information on pros and cons of each.