The Transformation of Document Storage into Records Management

The number of companies claiming to provide records management services continues to increase daily. Indeed it would appear anyone with a warehouse is offering this service. But what do we mean when we actually discuss the "Records management"?

Before we can really discuss the difference between Records Management and basic Document Storage, we need to identify what is a "record" versus what is a "document"?

The terms record, document and data are not interchangeable. According to BS15489, a Record is "Information created, received and maintained as evidence and/or information by an organization or person, in pursuance of legal obligations or in the transaction of business". A record has to be retained as long as it has value and is destroyed at the end of that period. A Document therefore, is everything else so "does a 'document' really need to be stored at all?"

Today with the advances in technology, courts have adapted to change and in certain circumstances are accepting emails and other electronic forms of documents or correspondences as 'best evidence' where bone-fide hard copy originals are not available.

In the past when companies were looking for solutions to remove or reduce costs from their business, their first port was to remove old files from their expensive office space and put it into deep storage in a remote warehouse where the price was low and access was minimal. This type of service tended to be used for inactive archival documents, as a low cost method of keeping them safe until the end of their statutory retention period when they could be destroyed. This is the origins of Document Storage.

As legislation and technology came into place requiring businesses and organisations to keep documents as evidence and technology has developed, the need has moved to that of managing information. This sort of active management, so an organization can quickly and easily locate & retrieve the information it seeks, has proven to offer such organisations competitive advantage in addition to the more obvious benefit of regulatory compliance.

Storing documents is not a simple as putting boxes in an empty warehouse. With the introduction of computers and the electronically created and stored data they have give rise to, we produce more paper records per head of employee than ever before. Companies increasingly find the 'paperless office' continues to be a myth though the 'less-paper' office is becoming a reality.

The world of document storage has transformed into an industry that is unrecognizable from its origins, although the paper document continues to remain constant, in the minefield of acronyms that surround the technology that has come to encompass a full Records Management Programme. As part of the wider picture organisations are expected to have a Business Continuity Plan (BCP) that includes Disaster Recovery Plans (DRP) all of which need to be safely secured but easy to retrieve. Enterprise content management (ECM), workflow mapping, digitization, hard copy storage web hosting of images and data mining are all part of the transformation that has come to represent the records management industry.

After understanding the difference between what needs to be stored and what does not one then has to start understanding the different types or records and who is creating them. Most

personnel are potential creators and they all need to understand whether the information they are creating should be stored securely and confidentially or securely destroyed. We have all heard of the recent stories of high profile laptops and information being stolen as well as identity theft fraudsters who rummage in bins to obtain details of clients in order to assume their identity. A formal in-house survey to understand who and where information should be stored can go a long way to creating a system understandable to all.

The key to designing a successful records management system is to incorporate the following characteristics: **Firstly,** one needs to be consistent in the manner in which records are captured, managed and maintained irrespective of whether they are electronic or paper records.

Secondly they must be accessible to authorized people. One of the fears that people have when out sourcing records is discussed is whether their records will be accessible. A good records management company should be able to guarantee that records will be physically or digitally delivered to within 24 hours.

Information must be held in a secure environment protect against floods, fire and intruders. Most records management organisations have password protected entry into their premises and do not publicly disclose the identity of their clients. In addition to the physical security and protection of the storage environment the documents also needs to be shown to be the original, free of any alteration. This may require special management and it is important that the provider is able to adhere to stringent management controls.

Finally, retention policies should reflect the requirements of law. It is pre-requisite to be able to provide a full audit trial of any item at any time and where appropriate a 'Certificate of Destruction' to prove that the document was destroyed in accordance with government laws.

To meet this need, the industry is developing ever more sophisticated solutions to automate the programme as much as possible. Smaller companies are benefiting directly as a result of the investment that is being made into systems for multi-national organisations, which make managing everyone's documents easier going forwards.

Standing still in this industry is not an option and the goal posts are constantly moving. Simply putting boxes onto shelves and leaving them there in perpetuity is no longer an option. Destruction review programmes, deep storage solutions, active file management and much more are areas that records management companies have to explore.

Despite the records management industry being quite a complex industry, the barriers of entry remain very low and we still find anyone with a warehouse a transport network feels more capable than records management specialist to enter into the industry at the detriment of their clients who may find the lower costs being charged are actually resulting in their records not being held in an environmentally controlled warehouse and resulting in damaged records.

Submitted by David Fathers,
Commercial Manager –
Continental Europe, Crown Records Management