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Succeeding at Information Governance: The 'Soft' Stuff is the Hard Stuff

Skills and Tasks Like Executive Sponsorship, Team Building, and Communications Can Make the Difference

By [Robert Smallwood, Institute for IG](#)

When organizations seek out answers for the keys to success in information governance (IG) projects, they often get the typical answer from consultants and vendors: it depends.

Sure, it depends on the focus of the initial effort in an IG program. The business driver for some organizations may be cost cutting measures that focus on reducing redundant, outdated and trivial (ROT) files to cut the cost of storage, or at least abate it. One organization we are working with spends \$40 million per year on disk storage and associated storage support and maintenance costs, and it is increasing at 30% per year. It has become a significant cost category that now has the attention of company executives. Hard dollar savings can be made by reducing storage costs of central servers and reducing dependence on poorly managed shared drives, while additional savings can be gained through improved content organization (through improved taxonomy design and leveraging metadata) and search capabilities on unstructured files such as scanned documents, Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. That's 'hard' stuff that yields hard dollar cost savings, but it is relatively straightforward.

Other organizations are focused on reducing runaway litigation discovery costs, and concentrate their efforts on e-discovery, by not only cutting ROT and organizing e-documents which cuts costs and improves search capabilities, but also by leveraging newer technologies such as predictive coding to automate and drastically reduce document review and costs.

Still other organizations focus their IG efforts on securing confidential information by identifying personally identifiable information (PII) and/or personal health information (PHI) and applying security software and techniques. Using file analysis, classification and remediation (FACR) software finding all incidences of PII and PHI is easy, due to the unique characteristics of the data. Then various encryption tactics are applied.

And yet other organizations focus on data governance as a strong component of their IG program. Improved data governance can yield cost savings by data scrubbing, data cleansing, de-duplicating, and implementing master data management (MDM). Also, new business insights can be gained by using data analytics, business intelligence (BI), trend analysis, and other tools. These new insights can lead to increased revenue from upselling and cross-selling existing customers, and finding new ones or creating new products or services.

The point is, there are multiple entry points for IG programs, and the focus of the effort depends on where the organization has decided to invest resources. The focus of an IG program is often borne out of the greatest pain points of risk and cost that boil up to the executive suite and demand attention. It is taken for granted that Sony Pictures is now investing resources in identifying and securing PII, intellectual property (IP), and other confidential information.

But what do all IG programs have in common as their most critical factor to succeed? What absolutely must be done before the program has a chance to succeed?

It isn't running FACR software to identify PII/PHI, duplicates, and out-of-date documents, and to begin broad classification of files, and insert basic metadata tags. No, that all sounds complicated but they are very straightforward processes. Simple software execution.

And it isn't implementing an enterprise content management (ECM) system aimed at reducing or eliminating shared drives and implementing a holistic approach to content management. That is what the software was designed to do. It manages content. Sure, many ECM efforts have failed but not because of the software itself lacked capability, but rather, poor implementation planning, training and communications efforts have been the primary cause.

What all IG programs must do well to succeed, the *absolute most critical elements*, are what is often referred to as "soft stuff." Soft stuff includes such activities and tasks as leadership, executive sponsorship execution, team selection and building, group dynamics, change management, communications, and training. All are critical program management functions. These are the crucial elements that any IG program must include—and do well—to succeed.

Now consider the fact that IG programs must be ongoing, so you have to plan on how you are going to keep team members motivated and performing over a span of years. How will you maintain their focus for three, four, five years or more? And instill commitment to the IG program in any team replacements or additions? These are challenging tasks. They are not easy to do, which is why many IG programs will fail, leaving careers in their wake.

I had a conversation recently with a high profile IG consultant who said, "I have designed perfect IG programs for organizations and nothing happened." Nothing happened because there was likely no strong executive sponsor; or the proper blend of professionals for the IG team (from risk, privacy, IT, legal, records management, etc.) were not assembled; or the business objectives of the new IG program were not clearly established and communicated, and therefore the appropriate level of budgetary and temporal resources were not committed.

As a starting point, let's examine some of the considerations for determining the best executive sponsor to drive an IG program. When a client of ours recently proclaimed, "Oh, an executive sponsor for this new IG program isn't a problem. We have four of them! They are all on board."

It sounds like good news. But there is work to do. Much work.

Consider that those four executive sponsors are likely from different departmental areas, and they will then appropriately have different agendas. That means conflicting goals and business

objectives for the IG program. It can mean resentment from executive sponsors who have had their priorities shelved in an initial IG effort. It can mean a blurring of focus for the IG program. That can mean waning support for the IG program over the long term. And that can mean failure.

What is needed is to get all the varying agendas and business objectives out on the table and to assess and prioritize them according to the organization's overall business objectives. That means nominating the most senior of the those four potential executive sponsors to be the executive sponsor for the IG program, or, better yet, finding that person on the organization chart who is senior to all four potential executive sponsors.

So if there is a scenario where the General Counsel, CIO, SVP of Operations, and Chief Security Officer all are on board to help drive the program, perhaps the best choice is an executive who they all report up through. Say, the EVP of Risk Management. After all, risk is a key impact area for IG programs: Reduce the risk that PII/PHI is breached, reduce the risk that confidential documents or IP is breached, reduce the risk that litigation costs soar out of control and threaten the viability of the organization.

If you attend one of the IG Bootcamps that is put on by the [IG Initiative](#), an exercise you may be introduced to is one where members of a roundtable role-play as if they are representing different functions in an IG program's initial stages. You will clearly see at the end of the exercise how widely the agendas and business objectives of each function vary and can be at odds with others. It is essential to harmonize and prioritize the objectives of the IG program, and in the process, as Bennett Borden puts it, "to find your natural allies."

For IG programs to succeed they must get off on the right foot. That requires strong leadership and executive sponsorship, a functional and consistently motivated team, and an excellent communications and training program plan.

Easier said than done. Hopefully IG practitioners will learn from the failures in ECM and records management programs and ensure that they address the "soft stuff" from the beginning.

Because it really is the hard stuff of IG.

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