

The Benefits of Systematic Assessment

Why organisations should take the time to review their records management program

Most organisations understand their current records management process and know what improvements are needed to ensure compliance. However, much of this understanding resides in the experience and knowledge of a single individual — the records manager. In addition, it is impossible even for the most diligent records manager to know exactly where every improvement is needed; the scope of most programs is simply too broad for one person to oversee everything. This phenomenon is not unique to records management; it exists in most business processes (e.g. sales, manufacturing) and explains why so many general assessment programs exist such as Six-Sigma and Total Quality Management.

Taking the time to conduct a systematic assessment of your existing records management program provides a number of benefits — even for records managers and organisations that believe they have a thorough understanding of their program. This paper discusses the benefits of using a formalised, systematic assessment tool to evaluate your records management program and how Iron Mountain assists organisations in this process.

IT'S WORTH DOING / RECORDS MANAGEMENT DESERVES THE ATTENTION

Given today's new legal realities and the rapidly changing world of regulations, most records management programs warrant a systematic review to ensure they meet compliance standards. If an organisation goes through an assessment process and finds that they meet the grade in all areas, they can pat themselves on the back and feel good about their program. However, most organisations that conduct a thorough assessment will uncover areas that require attention. In these cases, the assessment process will highlight potential problems before they become a crisis - which is when most organisations pay attention to their weaknesses. Conducting a systematic assessment of the records management program is analogous to an annual physical; people do not have one because they feel sick, they want to prevent illness.

BENEFITS OF CONDUCTING A SYSTEMATIC ASSESSMENT

A systematic assessment provides many benefits, including:

- It allows records management staff to step out of the trenches and evaluate the overall health of their program.
- It provides a framework for evaluating current performance and creates a benchmark for the future.
- It enhances communication across the organisation.

Stepping out of the Trenches

Today, business functions across the organisation including records management find themselves doing more with less. As a result, records managers spend much of their time in the trenches, focusing on day-to-day tasks and putting out fires. Many records managers would like to conduct a comprehensive review of their program to identify any areas of weakness. Unfortunately, finding the time and resources to do so presents a challenge. Using a pre-configured systematic assessment tool provides a means of translating desire into a tactical action plan.

A formal assessment can also help separate the records manager from the program itself. In many organisations, the records manager led the development of existing policies and practices. Being human, they sometimes struggle to objectively critique their own accomplishments. An assessment tool provides a means of looking at the program through a different set of lenses. In addition, organisations often find the credibility of a third party beneficial when trying to communicate the importance of their program, and the required changes, to the entire organisation.

Providing a Framework for Evaluating Performance

A systematic assessment breaks a process down into its individual components and then evaluates each one in detail. This exercise helps organisations:

- Identify and prioritise tasks
- Identify stakeholders
- Create concrete metrics

Identify and prioritise tasks: Most strategic policies do not address tactical steps. A systematic assessment identifies the critical tasks associated with each step of the overall process. In some cases, it identifies key tasks that have been overlooked and others that currently receive too much attention.

Identifying and prioritising tasks builds a foundation for the records management plan to move forward. Instead of haphazardly reacting to whatever needs to be fixed that day, organisations can follow a prioritised list of actions to move closer to compliance.

Identify stakeholders: With any enterprise-wide process it is easy to lose sight of all the various stakeholders. By looking at a task component individually, it becomes clear who is responsible for each task, who is affected most by the process, and who is most at risk.

Create concrete metrics: Organisations often find it difficult to evaluate the performance of a business process beyond a general sense that it is succeeding or falling short of expectations. A systematic assessment results in concrete metrics that enable organisations to evaluate their current performance as well as changes over time. These same metrics also allow organisations to more easily compare themselves to industry benchmarks.

Enhancing Communication

Records managers constantly look for marketing tools to help promote adherence to existing policies. A systematic assessment can act as a marketing tool and enhance communication across the organisation. First and foremost, it provides a degree of formality that raises the profile of records management. It also acts as a channel for ongoing training, which allows records managers to remind end-users of existing policies.

Individuals outside of a business process typically are unfamiliar with its tasks and complexities. This is especially true of behind-the-scenes processes, like records management. Breaking the process into discrete steps and tasks illustrates the breadth of the process and helps people recognise how all of the components work together and the consequences of process failures. This helps people realise why their piece of the process is important to the overall success of the program and makes it relevant to them personally.

Communicating and illustrating the range of tasks involved in a process also makes it easier to acquire the resources needed to develop an optimal program -it's easier for executives to approve budgets if they see all individual tasks that need to be funded.

IRON MOUNTAIN'S ASSESSMENT TOOLS

Iron Mountain offers a variety of assessment tools to help organisations achieve the benefits highlighted in this paper. The Risk Assessment is designed for organisations that want a quick, high-level overview of their program. Implementing this assessment requires a minimal commitment of time and resources from the participating organisation.

Best Practices Risk Assessment

The Best Practices Risk Assessment is composed of a Diagnostic Questionnaire and Diagnostic Summary Report. In some cases, an Action Plan and Benchmarking Report are additionally included.

The Diagnostic Questionnaire: The foundation of the assessment process is a 24-item questionnaire organised around the five essential components of a compliant records management program. In the first step of the process, Iron Mountain representatives use a Diagnostic Questionnaire to conduct personal interviews within an organisation. Typically, the highest-level Records Manager or senior records officer is the primary participant in the interview process. In some cases, a company's General Counsel or CFO participates in the interview as well. An Iron Mountain representative conducts the interview to ensure the questions are clearly understood and that the results accurately reflect the organisation's performance.

Diagnostic Summary Report: After completing the Diagnostic Questionnaire interview, the data is analysed and a Diagnostic Summary Report is prepared. The customised report summarises the health of the participating organisation's records management program in five key areas and provides an overall Health Score for the current program. The Health Score provides a simple metric for describing the current state of a records management program, and its performance relative to best-in-class standards.

Action Plan (optional): Based on the Diagnostic Summary Report and other related resources, Iron Mountain may prepare a customised Action Plan that translates the organisation's assessment scores into actionable recommendations. The Action Plan identifies potential solutions to the issues identified in the Risk Assessment. The Presentation itself provides participating companies with a forum for internal communication about the current program and steps that can be taken to address program risks.

Benchmarking Report (optional): A Benchmarking Report may be prepared which shows how their individual organisation compares to others. The Benchmarking Report is delivered after an organisation completes the Risk Assessment, and may be updated annually thereafter.

TESTIMONIALS

Organisations who have used Iron Mountain's Risk Assessment tools find that they provide quantitative data and benchmarking comparisons that get the attention of internal audiences like senior management and make a meaningful difference in their records management program. The following are some testimonials from customers that have participated in the Risk Assessment.

"I have been looking for a program analysis like this to take to management."

"This will be wonderful to provide to our management to validate our program quality and assist us in getting budget money for areas where we want to improve or expand."

"The Iron Mountain assessment program came at a really good time – right before we had to go in front of senior management and in front of a newly formed compliance committee. We were able to take our results from the assessment program and say 'here is where we are and this is what we need'."

"Benchmark information is useful and valuable to take to my senior management. It helps me to show where we need to improve our program. I already knew where we needed to be, but it was very helpful to have a third-party organisation point out where we are weak compared to others."

KNOW THE HEALTH OF YOUR RECORDS MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Investing in your records management program not only supports regulatory obligations, but also helps you to manage your information assets more effectively. Conducting a thorough assessment allows your organisation to:

- Identify the overall health of your program
- Evaluate performance based on the success or failure of individual components
- Raise awareness and communicate records management policies
- Design training programs to lay the foundation for solid records management practices

Records management programs should not be designed in a vacuum. By completing a thorough internal review of all facets of the program, and partnering with a knowledgeable third-party for improvement, your organisation will see dramatic results.

If you are interested in systematically assessing your current records management program, consider contacting Iron Mountain to see how the Risk Assessment will benefit your organisation.