

Chaos theory

ECM is a landscape that is changing rapidly and managing those changes can be a challenge for CIOs. AIIM's Doug Miles asks are organisations headed for digital chaos or can order be restored to the enterprise by viewing issues as business, not technology?

In many sectors within technology, people will eventually ask 'what comes next?' This is now beginning to happen within Enterprise Content Management (ECM). Even the very term 'ECM' is starting to feel a little strained. This is happening for a variety of reasons, reasons that many in the industry will be very familiar with: the blurring of the line between structured and unstructured data, which is part of a wider shift away from our older ideas about what 'content' is.

In short, content is changing and so are the technologies and process that we use to store, manage and deploy that content

However, there are much deeper, wider and more disruptive forces at work that call for a very different approach to organisational 'content' - and which change the debate from a somewhat academic one, as in 'what should we rename our industry?' to a much more practical, real-world focused one. As part of that move, the ECM industry needs to begin focusing more and more on the business problems that need to be solved and get away from talk dominated by ideas about 'solutions' and technologies, too.

ECM IN THE REAL WORLD

Industry analyst group Gartner has written at length about the Digital Industrial Economy and most commentators agree that we are now firmly on the way to this. Businesses are having to change the way they think about and use technology. This means a variety of organisations that don't think of themselves as particularly interested in 'digital' or 'information', increasingly have to be if they are to survive and thrive in such an economy.

But talking about information, content and big data in a theoretical way is all very well. They are all concepts about which there is much discussion and most are in agreement that all are increasingly important in modern business. However, when you speak to companies that are trying to get to grips with these concepts, the over-riding feeling is one of chaos.

They feel that their file servers are completely out of control, worry that their private and confidential information is leaking out of the organisation at an alarming rate and that the sheer volume of information and content that they have to deal with is spinning out of control. What they are actually contemplating is not a new Digital Industrial Economy but a slide into Digital Chaos.

THREE DISRUPTIVE FORCES

This is the backdrop for the ECM industry right now and we must all agree to find practical ways of addressing it. We need to be clear as to exactly what is happening out there though and there are three disruptive forces impacting the market.

Consumerisation of IT - with the launch of smartphones and tablet PCs in particular, the world of business computing was changed dramatically and forever. At Christmas 2010, when a lot of CEOs and C-suite execs first got an iPad, they were blown away by its ease-of-

use, form and functionality. When they came back into work in January, they demanded that their existing corporate IT systems worked just as well as their new toys. That huge rise in expectations, right across the workforce, is something that is fundamental to the way people expect to be able to work with systems from here on out.

Cloud and mobile - both are creating an equally huge set of expectations around anytime, anywhere access to information. It's also collapsing the purchasing cycle down to effectively zero (Yankee Group predicts 2015 will be the first year we see a trillion dollars' worth of mobile-driven transactions, for example.)

Changing workplace - finally, there is the changing face of work, with a drive to a much less hierarchical, 'flatter' management style, accompanied by a younger workforce that is much more technology-astute than any we have ever seen before.

The net result of all these changes is that the volume, variety and velocity of information in our lives is getting bigger all the time. It all means that managing this flow - and avoiding the dip into 'digital chaos' - is going to be the biggest single business challenge of the next decade.

ADDRESSING DIGITAL CHAOS

The best place to start is by asking ourselves the following four questions:

- How do we best manage the risk around growing volumes of content?
- How do we transform our content-intensive business processes?
- How can we use content to better engage customers, employees and partners?
- How do we obtain better business insight from all the mass of information we are currently gathering?

At the same time, technology is changing, too. Think about the shift you can see where IT is starting to focus less on cost reduction and more on adding value; on how the C-suite is moving from being cheerfully ignorant about technology to being actively engaged with it; and where mobile and social is not a differentiator, but a must-have.

Despite this, many organisations are still approaching collaboration the same way they did in 2004 - with lots of emails, with attachments that get sent out on a 'reply all' basis. This worked reasonably enough then, but is it still what we should be doing? How does it meet our goal of not just automating but starting to truly transform business processes? Or look around and see how the organisation is moving from CapEx purchasing of systems to OpEx... or the way IT itself is having to adjust from having a market value in terms purely of base skills to one where value can only be found in context, i.e. contribution to the business?

Striking the right balance between these older forms of working with information and the new realities is the major task we now face. Doing so will be no small task and the best way to start is to talk about these challenges not as product/technology issues, but as business problems.