As records system administrator for Arkansas Electric Cooperatives (AEC), it is my job to ensure that the organization’s business and operating records are being managed so that current and accurate information is readily accessible and is in compliance with regulatory recordkeeping requirements. With the majority of records now being created and maintained electronically, managing those records has become increasingly problematic.

AEC needed a technology solution that would help us organize our business information for easy access and quick retrieval and enable us to archive important electronic records in a secure and stable environment. Electronic Document Management System (EDMS) seemed to be the answer. What I didn’t realize at the time was that selling the idea to senior management, getting budgetary approval, and implementing the system would take two years of my life!

**Records Management at AEC**

Typically, business and operational records experience heavy use during their relatively short “active” life, then see a sharp drop in use. Many records, in fact, are used only during a business transaction or operation and may never be accessed again. Regulatory requirements, however, often dictate a set period for which many of these records must be retained. In addition, certain records might be needed for reference purposes and should be kept in order to provide a historical perspective of the organization.

Components of AEC’s comprehensive records management program, which began development in 1988, include a retention schedule that assigns retention periods to all of the Cooperatives’ records, procedures for the systematic destruction of records that have satisfied their retention requirements, and protection of records that provide a “permanent” record of the organization. A vital records plan is also being developed to safeguard records that would be required in order to continue business operations in the event of a disaster. Together these components help us systematically control our business and operating records throughout their life cycle – from the time they are created, through their active life, until they are either destroyed or archived for long-term retention. As the volume of AEC’s electronic documents and records continues to grow, we have become increasingly dependent on the information contained in them. Meanwhile, paper records continue to be maintained, often living on as duplication of records that are being created and stored electronically. Compliance with records retention and disposition rules and regulations was difficult, if not impossible. While a program for records retention and disposition had been created for the company’s records, the majority of electronic records were not being retained in accordance with the program. It became clear that managing this problematic electronic information would require a technology solution, and that EDMS might provide just the tool we needed to effectively manage our electronic documents and records throughout their life cycle.

**THE PROJECT**

After convincing senior management that an electronic document management system was worth exploring, an EDMS project team was appointed. In addition to the records system administrator and business information technology manager, the team included representatives from each major business unit to ensure that all areas would be represented during the analysis and selection process. Once the project team was in place, the team selected a “work group” – a team of approximately 30 employees most familiar with the creation and use of documents in their areas.

The EDMS project kicked off with an educational meeting for the document work group and guests. Presentations included a word of support for the project from AEC’s President/CEO, a case study...
from another electric cooperative that had successfully implemented an electronic document management system, and an overview of the features and benefits of EDMS.

Step 1: Needs Assessment

The first step in the project was to develop a requirements document to analyze our business processes and assess our document management needs. The purpose of this document would be to build a business case for EDMS and to help ensure that whatever system we selected would meet our information requirements. The work group was given instructions for inventorying the documents used in each department. Through the document inventories we were able to identify the flow of documents through business processes and determine retrieval and growth patterns as well as storage requirements for those documents.

Step 2: The Business Case

The document inventory identified forty different business processes which were creating approximately 23,000 documents per month or some 276,000 documents per year. These numbers, based on participation by twelve departments, formed the basis for our EDMS business case. Three criteria were used to determine which of these forty processes would benefit most from an EDMS. The criteria and the thresholds set for each were as follows: 1) Volume: Business processes that created more than 300 documents per month; 2) Access: Processes utilizing documents accessed by more than three users; and 3) Retrieval: Business process documents that were being retrieved more than three times per week were flagged. Four business processes met the thresholds set for all three criteria. These processes became our pilot applications.

Step 3: The Selection

Based on the information from the requirements document, the team developed a Request for Information (RFI) and distributed it to forty EDMS vendors. Project team members evaluated and ranked each item in the RFI in order of importance. A matrix was then created to compare these weighted rankings to each vendor’s response and produce a “score” for each product. The matrix produced a graph showing total scores for the products and enabled the team to narrow the RFI responses down to six vendors. Each of the six vendors was contacted and meetings were set up to review their products and discuss our requirements with the vendors. All of the vendors, with one exception, came onsite to demonstrate their software, review our needs, and answer any questions the team had regarding their solutions. The project team then reviewed the information gathered from the six vendors and the product demonstrations and made a final selection.

Step 4: The Sell

Once the project team made their final decision, it was time to sell senior management on the idea. The team developed a presentation outlining the benefits EDMS would bring to AEC and showing how implementing the system would positively impact our bottom line. While EDMS benefits can be difficult to quantify, we were able to use cost avoidance figures to show a favorable return on investment and justify the expenditure. Through a comparison of manual filing systems and electronic document management systems, we were able to demonstrate a significant reduction in filing, retrieval, and storage costs and show a return on our sizable investment within two years. Following the presentation to senior management and a question and answer session the project was approved, and we were ready to move forward with the installation and implementation.

Step 5: Installation and Implementation

Before implementation could begin our EDMS vendor, Document Imaging Solutions (DIS), met with users from each of our four pilot applications to develop specifications, identify document types and establish field attributes for each. Once DIS had customized their product to fit our applications, they were ready to install the software. We decided to start with one application, AEC Accounts Payable, and to get it completely up and running before moving to the next.

How EDMS Works
EDMS is actually a combination of technologies. With the Accounts Payable (A/P) application, for example, invoices that are received as paper documents are scanned into the system. Checks used to pay those invoices are created on an IBM AS400 and downloaded into EDMS. These two document types are linked together by a unique key, in this case the combination of invoice number and vendor number. Once EDMS finds that key in the AS400, additional index fields such as the invoice date and check number are automatically populated with data from the AS400.

Utilizing ERM (Electronic Report Management) technology, several A/P computer reports created from data on the AS400 are also downloaded into EDMS. These reports, which were previously printed out in duplicate and distributed to multiple departments, are now stored online where they can be accessed, searched, and, if necessary, a section or all of the report can be printed on demand.

Most electronic document formats such as Word documents and Excel spreadsheets can also be loaded into EDMS. Board minutes, for example, are loaded as Word documents to provide full text searching of meeting minutes. This allows searching past minutes to quickly determine when a specific issue was discussed or how a decision was made. Spreadsheets used to calculate monthly power bills are loaded as supporting documents for the wholesale power billing application. While these documents allow full text searching, EDMS stores them as unalterable documents that cannot be edited or changed.

EDMS Benefits

Now that EDMS is up and running and we have implemented a number of applications, the organization is beginning to see value in this new technology. Here is a summary of benefits that EDMS has brought to AEC:

Cost Savings: As mentioned earlier, one of the primary selling points for EDMS was cost avoidance. While this benefit remains difficult to quantify, access and retrieval of documents is more efficient and there have been no reported “lost” or “misfiled” documents in EDMS since its implementation. Being able to retrieve quickly the most current version of a document without leaving your desk saves time for more important things, which means the company is getting more for its money.

Access: Probably the biggest advantage of EDMS has been its ability to provide simultaneous document access to a number of users spread throughout the organization. Employees in remote locations can quickly retrieve and view records they previously would have had to request from a department who would then fax or mail a copy to them - both requiring time and effort, not to mention more paper.

Compliance: As an electric utility company AEC must comply with a number of government rules and regulations. EDMS provides a secure and stable environment where mandatory records can be stored for easy access by auditors or other regulators. These records cannot be altered, and any document access or action can be tracked through an audit history.

Disaster Recovery: Recent rules from the Rural Utilities Service have forced AEC and other electric cooperatives to develop a business plan for disaster preparedness and recovery. As part of AEC’s business continuity plan, vital records that would be required to resume or continue operations in the event of a disaster are being stored in EDMS, where they are secured and backed up daily. Being able to access these vital records through EDMS means that business operations which depend on these records can continue during or immediately following a disaster and that information needed to show compliance with regulations will remain intact and accessible.

What’s Next?

AEC continues to add applications to EDMS as users become more familiar with this new technology and more comfortable with its storage and retrieval capabilities. Meanwhile, advances in technology continue to streamline and expand the features and add functionality to our system. Our next major enhancement will be email management functionality. This add-on will integrate with EDMS and allow the user to drag and drop an email into a file folder inside Microsoft Outlook. This action will store the email inside EDMS with all of its metadata (date, recipients, sender, subject, etc.) as
well as any attachments. Retention rules will be applied to the email record once it is stored inside EDMS based on the user’s folder hierarchy. This new technology will help us manage email by preserving those that are declared as records and removing non-record email from the organization’s computer system.

As we move forward in the Twenty-First Century, it is clear that technology is playing an increasingly important role in the way our corporate information is being created, used, and retained. The challenge for records managers is to keep abreast of both the technology and the recordkeeping rules and regulations. In the words of Will Rogers, “Even if you’re on the right track you’ll get run over if you just sit there.”

Before becoming the records system administrator for Arkansas Electric Cooperatives, Sherry Owen worked as reference librarian for the UCA Torreyson Library. Sherry received a BA from Hendrix College and her MLS from Peabody Graduate School of Library Science. She is a Certified Records Manager (CRM) and an active member of ARMA (Association for Records Managers and Administrators), Int.

Because of her work on the selection and implementation of AEC’s electronic document management system Sherry received the 2005 AECC Employee of the Year award. In his presentation of the Employee of the Year Award to Mrs. Owen, AEC’s Vice-President for Information Technology said, “On a personal note, I’ll confess that she has taught me more than I ever expected about how library science and records management are key to the management of information.”

Sherry and her husband, Jim, have two children, Sarah and Hunter, and live in Conway.

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