

Independent Assessment

by Alan Radding

June 7, 2004

Enterprise Content Management A compliance panacea?

Companies are scrambling to implement enterprise content management (ECM) systems as they race to meet deadlines for a host of regulatory compliance mandates, both in the US and abroad. In this dash to implement something, anything, to meet compliance pressures companies run the risk of implementing the wrong thing.

Don't misunderstand. ECM can benefit most organizations, but ECM, no matter how worthwhile, will **not** make you compliant. All it will do is make it easier for you to track, find, and manage the information you may need to prove compliance when the regulators or litigators come knocking.

Four Critical Factors

ECM and its closely associated counterpart, information lifecycle management (ILM), provides a set of capabilities to collect, organize, track, and access content in its varied forms throughout the enterprise. Effective ECM requires getting four critical factors right: policy, process, data, and security. Capturing the data in an ECM system—the focus of many immediate compliance-driven efforts—only addresses part of the challenge. The organization still must tie the data to specific business processes and wrap it all with well-defined policies, such as retention policies, if it expects to get the long-term benefits of ECM. These benefits are nothing less than control of your content assets, whatever they may be. And, of course, everything that happens must be governed by the applicable security.

Before you rush off to buy ECM or compliance software, stop to examine your business. In particular, take a close look at your processes, policies, and data. Identify your business processes and their corresponding data. Then define policies to specify how content is to be handled for every kind of content. Such policies specify who can access the content and who can change it, how it is to be stored and protected, when it can be destroyed, and more. Only after you have done this should you look at ECM products.

Elements of ECM

ECM vendors, who have been pushing this technology for a long time, have sensed compliance as the big new thing required to make ECM a top corporate priority, the equivalent of Y2K all over again. So, they have rushed to introduce a slew of products that promise to address compliance along with the usual ECM issues. Every offering typically involves some if not most of the following elements:

Content capture component—Data migration, extraction, and transformation capabilities often augmented by a scanner with OCR for capturing paper-based content. Increasingly companies also want to capture voice-based content, such as phone messages, and other types of content, such as video or instant messages.

Central repository—a place to put all the information necessary to access, organize, and manage the content. This will likely be a meta-data repository rather than the actual content itself, which will continue to reside in its usual place.

ECM software—the capabilities to index, search, track, and manage the individual pieces of content and applications like document management, records management, Web content management, reporting, analysis, and others that tap the central repository

Workflow and collaboration management—tracks and enforces business process and policies around a given piece of content and orchestrates the creation and use of enterprise content

Security—including identification management, audit and tracking, and access control

Organizations likely have some of these components already in place, which they can repurpose or extend for ECM duties. Storage resource management tools, for example, can help enterprises identify and organize their stored data based on access and retention policies to meet compliance requirements. Similarly, companies may already have data warehouses or portals that can serve as a central ECM repository or directories that can handle access control chores.

In addition, ECM will require standard technology infrastructure components such as servers, data storage systems, and networks. In most companies these pieces already are in place although the infrastructure components may need to be scaled up to accommodate the increased storage or network needs related to the ECM system.

ECM Best Practices

Before running off to implement an ECM solution, managers who have implemented ECM successfully recommend paying close attention to the following best practices.

Start with planning. Make sure you understand the basic business processes involved along with the content, policies, and information flows associated with each business process.

Change management is critical. Think through the changes—when and how processes will change—and get employee commitment to the changes.

Begin small. Do one thing and then expand as it makes sense. Start by addressing a specific issue in one department, such as tracking the handling of financial data or consolidating and storing email messages. Gradually, the ECM strategy is applied elsewhere in the organization.

But plan to succeed big. You can't really forecast how much content you ultimately will need to organize, store, protect, and retrieve. That means the technology you choose for the initial effort has to be able to scale.

Be prepared to tie it all together. The power of ECM comes from having all the organization's content accessible and managed centrally. That means integration. Various standards, such as XML (extensible markup language), and technologies like Web services promise to make feasible the otherwise seemingly impossible task of widespread ECM integration.

Implement workflow—use policies to drive the automation of ECM-enabled business processes. Specifically, you need to define the workflow and collaboration processes involved and determine how flexible they must be.

Ten years ago doing ECM was hard. But after years of investment in data warehouses, integration middleware, management and security tools, and data access and retrieval systems, many of the pieces are there, ready and waiting. The hard part now is identifying what you have for content and wrapping it up in policies and process.