

Registering and searching for records in electronic records management systems

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Abstract

Records are increasingly becoming electronic. Both public and private organizations are more and more making information and records only available to their employees, customers and constituents on such a format. Electronic Records Management Systems (ERMS) are, therefore, increasingly being implemented to manage the records of many organizations.

The purpose of this research paper was to examine the use of ERMS in organizations in Iceland. It identifies which records by form or type, either created in-house or received, are captured into ERMS. The methods of registering records into ERMS, the registration parameters, are identified as well as the search parameters, the methods of searching for records in the ERMS.

Other findings are that the capturing of records is not the distributed effort that the systems are designed for. Records managers are often responsible for capturing records of others and sometimes carry the total burden as for incoming facsimile messages. Several forms and types of records do not find their way into the system. E-mail is the record form that most employees neglected to capture into ERMS. It neither became a part of the file for paper records. The absence of e-mail in the records collection leaves a huge gap in the memory of many organizations today.

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1. Introduction

This study was designed to gain an understanding of how Electronic Records Management Systems (ERMS) were being implemented and used. No such research had been conducted in Iceland before, and only a few descriptive accounts have recently become available on the implementation of such systems in other countries. No prior studies were available on how ERMS were actually being used. That is the topic of this paper.

ERMS are information systems designed to capture and manage records in any format according to the organization's record-keeping principles. They are designed to manage records from the time that they were created or appear until they are disposed of, either destroyed or put into permanent storage. ERMS support knowledge man-

agement (KM) as an important part of the organizational memory is preserved as records.

How employees use ERMS in their work is the focus of this research paper. It examines how employees enter records into ERMS and subsequently how they search for these records. There was a strong relationship between the important implementation factors and the level of use (Gunnlaugsdottir, 2008). This paper does not discuss the implementation. ERMS also have various important features, such as access control, security issues and protection of privacy, but these are not covered here.

The following discussion is organized into six sections starting with a presentation of the methodology used. Four themes were explored in the research as a part of studying the use: (1) forms and types of records created in-house captured into ERMS, (2) forms and types of records received from others captured into ERMS, (3) methods of registering records into ERMS—the registration parameters and (4) methods of searching for and retrieving records in ERMS—the search parameters. These four

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themes are covered in Sections 3–6. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings.

2. Methodology

The aim of this part of the research was to discover how employees were using ERMS. Qualitative methodology was chosen for conducting the research which lends itself conveniently to collecting information in the field at the employees' place of work (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Gorman & Clayton, 1997; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The main data collection took place during the period September 2001 to April 2005. Two different methods were used in the field. Open-ended interviews were conducted with employees (King, 1999; Kvale, 1996) and participant observations were undertaken in the participating organizations (Hartley, 1999).

The sample consisted of eight organizations that had bought ERMS. They can be divided into two groups: (1) Four organizations, two public (Government Institution and City Organization) and two private (Financial Institute and Manufacturing Firm), were studied in great detail. A number of employees with the same job function were interviewed in each. These were eight managers, four records managers, four computer specialists, eight specialists and 10 general office employees. These individuals were believed to be those best able to inform on the implementation and the use. (2) A corroborative group that also consisted of two public (Municipal Office and Public Services Office) and two private organizations (Construction Firm and Food Processing). There a key employee, the records manager, was interviewed. The records managers, who were, as in the other four organizations, all qualified and experienced professionals in RM, could provide a wealth of information that corroborated the findings in the four organizations studied in detail. Finally, a third group, six key employees who worked as consultants/teachers at six different software providers, was interviewed. These six consultants could offer valuable information that supported the findings in the other two groups. The total number of interviewees was thus 44 individuals. Approaching the research from these three angles was believed to produce the most reliable findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Janesick, 1994). The research was also based on seven participant observations at the four organizations that were studied in a great detail. The workstations visited were 140 in total. One participant observation was also carried out at one of the software providers. To obtain more truthful findings, tabulations and quantitative measurements were used whenever the qualitative data lent themselves to such interpretations as suggested by Silverman (2005).

All of the eight organizations are considered rather large in terms of Icelandic organizations with a total number of employees ranging between 150 and 300 office employees. The number of employees performing other functions varied between the organizations. These organizations

operated in different fields of industry and they were understood to have experienced a variable success rate in implementing the ERMS being bought, but the exact situation and the reasons why were not known.

The eight organizations had bought four different ERMS with two organizations using the same system. All of the four systems have been evaluated and are believed to meet all of the important requirements of the DoD (2002) 5015.2-STD—latest edition (2007), the requirements for approved RM procedures according to the ISO 15489 standard for RM (ISO, 2001a, 2001b), and Icelandic law. They all meet the requirements of being ERMS (ARMA International, 2004, p. 4; CECA, 2001, pp. 63–64). These four ERMS were at the time those that had gained the widest acceptance on the Icelandic market.

The four ERMS offer opportunities for group work and are solutions in a groupware environment (Coleman, 1999; Gunnlaugsdottir, 2003, 2004; Orlikowski & Barley, 2001). Groupware is designed to facilitate co-operation between employees, preserve knowledge and support KM that is necessary for the successful running of an organization today (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Amidon & Skyrme, 1997; Applegate, 1995; Drucker, 1988; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Seng, Zannes, & Pace, 2002). Knowledge is an important part of the capital of the modern organization. Many authors have written about the returns and the value of knowledge—this intellectual capital and put forward ways to measure it (Davenport, De Long, & Beers, 1998; Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Kaplan & Norton, 1996; Kujansivu & Lonnqvist, 2007; Stewart, 1997; Sveiby, 1997).

It was on purpose that no organizations were included in the sample where the implementation was believed to have been a total failure. Such organizations could not shed any light on the part of the research covered here, how employees actually used ERMS in registering and searching for records.

3. Forms and types of records created in-house captured into ERMS

Records come in different forms and are of different types. The form of a record refers to the outer appearance and formal characteristics of the record, whereas the type of the record refers to the content. Records of the same form can differ considerably in their content, whereas records of the same type are alike in content. An annual report is, for example, a type of a record. The content is the same from one company to another. E-mail, on the other hand, is a form of a record. It can deal with any subject. It can also appear on different formats, electronic or printed out on paper.

It seems that employees often find it difficult to distinguish between the form and the type of a record. As an example they find it difficult to decide whether a letter is a form or a type of a record. For that reason ERMS are equipped with drop-down lists, one for the type and

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