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Information management strategy
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SDC CORPORATE INFORMATION MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

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Introduction

Information management has been defined as “the means by which an organisation efficiently plans, collects, organises, uses, controls, disseminates and disposes of its information, and through which it ensures that the value of that information is identified and exploited to the fullest extent.”¹

It is only by recognising that the information held by individuals and service units within Salisbury District Council has a definite value, that we can recognise the importance that should be given to the provision and maintenance of that information.

Failure to manage information properly within SDC exposes us to a significant financial, legal, public relations and manpower-shortage risk.

IM processes that we must manage

The conversion of an individual’s knowledge (about, for example, a process we undergo, or a case that is being handled) into information that can be shared within SDC to increase the knowledge of other individuals is an expensive task.

The knowledge has to be documented, stored, disseminated, periodically reviewed to ensure it is still accurate and current and may eventually need archiving or deleting. Hence it is important that there are clear processes that should be followed for information management, and a number of restrictions that will influence these processes.

Giving proper relevance to information management means defining and implementing processes for the following key tasks:

Ownership

Lifecycle

Information is not static and unchanging. Unwitting reliance on an out-of-date procedure could be more dangerous than not finding the procedure in the first place.

Lifecycle management encompasses the following tasks:

- *Commissioning* – is the information necessary? Which medium or media should it be produced in: a web page, a brochure, a poster, ...?

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- *Production* – all information is produced, whether it is text, a graphic, or tables of data. The producer must ensure that the information matches the house style for text and images.
- *Editing* – all information will need editing; for example, to check for spelling and grammatical errors and obvious factual inaccuracies. Good editing can also improve the understandability by reducing redundant words and phrases. *"Rewrite and revise. Do not be afraid to seize what you have and cut it to ribbons ... Good writing means good revising."* —Strunk and White, *Elements of Style*
- *Approval/release* – information should not move from draft to released status without approval from someone who has responsibility (or delegated responsibility) for that information and understands the consequences of releasing it for wider readership. The approval process could in some cases be arbitrarily complicated: for example, it may be necessary to gain service unit, legal and member approval before releasing the information. In other cases the approval process may be more or less nominal.
- *Maintenance* – Some information remains unchanging after release (for example a press release). Other information may change on a regular basis (for example, bank holiday bin collection schedules being updated every three months) or an irregular basis (for example changes to council policies). Other information may appear and disappear on a regular or irregular basis (for example, information and warnings about flooding in the district). In all cases an explicit decision must be taken about how frequently the information needs checking and – as necessary – updating.
- *Deletion/archiving* – Eventually all information will need to be removed from its initial prominence. This may involve archiving, as may happen with Council minutes and agendas, or deletion, as may occur with a winter flood warning that is no longer current come spring. The penalties for not deleting or archiving content when appropriate are severe: a more cluttered, less efficient website; a common area where users can no longer find relevant documents; the risk of following an outdated policy and believing it is still current.

Information attributes

All information has certain properties or attributes separate from the actual words, figures and images used. Good information management requires that responsibility for these attributes is clearly defined.

- *Accuracy* – the information must be accurate, that is it must be factually correct and up-to-date. Users expect accuracy, whether they are members of the public or officers or councillors. The information owner is liable for any errors caused by a user relying on factually inaccurate information. For example, if the website stated that we were offering a £25 discount on council tax to anyone signing up to pay by direct debit, but this was actually a special offer that had finished two months ago, a member of the public would feel aggrieved if they were turned down for the discount having applied in good faith after reading about the offer on the website.
- *Quality* – the information you provide should meet quality criteria: for example, it should not contain spelling and grammatical mistakes, and should be written in plain English. Many people will not notice the care put in to this area, but for those that do, a decrease in quality will lead to a rapid breakdown of trust between the user and the information: "if they didn't take the time to check this information for spelling mistakes, can I rely on its accuracy?"
- *Reliability*
- *Metadata* – metadata is data about data. For example, an article contains not only its text (the "data") but also information such as the author, the date it was written, the date it was last revised, keywords that help searching (the "metadata"). Some of this metadata can be derived automatically from clever information technology (for example, automatically adding a

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“last revised date” to a document). Other metadata must be added by hand (for example, a list of documents). Broadly speaking, metadata are useful for three purposes: to help users search (“find me all pages about leisure facilities written this year”), to enhance a user’s trust in the information (“this information comes from an author I trust and was updated just last week”) and to help the management of the information (“send a reminder to all authors who have pages more than 1 year old saying they need to re-approve or delete their pages”).

Information Governance

Information Governance can be described as the implementation of relevant legislation eg in relation to the Data Protection Act 1998; the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 and other access to information regimes embedded in other legislation (eg Local Government and Planning Acts).

Data protection

Freedom of Information

Information Management

Information Management can be seen broadly as the adoption of non-statutory information standards, eg ISO 17799 for Information Security, e-GMS and the various Electronic Document Management Systems (EDRMS) CoPs (eg ISO 15489).

Electronic Document Record Management Systems (EDRMS)

Information security:

Business continuity

Disaster Recovery

The relationship between information technology, information management and knowledge management

There is a great deal of confusion between information technology and information management. This has led to relatively too much effort being spent on managing information technology, and relatively too little spent on managing information.

Information management is concerned with the actual meaningful content that we own and how that content is prepared and its quality ensured. Information technology helps with the dissemination and spreading of that content, but all the IT infrastructure in the world is of no use if the core content is of poor quality.

To take an analogy from the publishing world, IM is analogous with the writing and editing of a book, whereas IT is analogous with the printing and distribution of the book. Both processes are important, but the IT must always support the IM, not the other way round. There is no point printing and distributing a book if the content is garbage.

This should not be taken as implying that IT is unimportant. A well-designed IT architecture aids information management by facilitating the key IM processes. For example, a well designed content management system makes it a simple task to find all the web content that has not been reviewed within the last 12 months. But if there are not well-designed processes in place, with associated roles and responsibilities, to mandate such reviews, and with suitable sanctions in place if the reviews are not carried out, the technological ability of the IT infrastructure is wasted.

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Thus the IT should be seen as an enabler of the IM processes, rather than the IM processes having to fit the IT architecture.

KM is the process through which organisations generate value from their intellectual and knowledge-based assets. Most often, generating value from such assets involves sharing them among employees, departments and with other organisations in an effort to devise best practices. It's important to note that the definition says nothing about technology; while KM is often facilitated by IT, technology by itself is not KM.

Risk analysis

¹ Barbara Laffan, Queensland Government policy for managing information within government, quoted in <http://www.willpower.demon.co.uk/infoman.htm>.