# Four Keys to Successful Digital Document Management

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# Introduction

Document management is not a new activity. From the beginning of recorded history there have been documents and records. They may have been made of stone, papyrus or animal skin, but they were records of the written word, and somehow they had to be organized and stored. Eventually, as the printing press, typewriter and ultimately the computer became ubiquitous, the volume of documents exploded, and the need for document management accelerated exponentially. The document management "system" of recent times slowly emerged — by means of organizing and storing physical paper into folders, filing cabinets, and warehouses.

As personal computers came of age during the late 1990s and early 2000s, most businesses and many individuals acquired and began using them for all forms of document creation — from standard contracts and correspondence, to spreadsheet analyses and email exchanges. Many organizations continued to use the document management approach of printing and storing paper in the traditional file folder and filing cabinet arrangement, while others maintained electronic copies of documents in cumbersome folder/sub-folder data structures on their local area networks.

In recent years, technology has advanced to the degree that documents can now be created directly within a document management system, capturing the document in an organized structure from its creation point while providing rapid retrieval. In addition, mobile technology — predominantly driven by bandwidth proliferation and the introduction of the tablet form of computing — has demanded that organizations be able to obtain access to their critical documents anywhere, at any time.

## Making the Transition

Many organizations find themselves in a quandary regarding document management today. If they are currently using paper and the related file folder systems (paper), the need to move to a digital document management approach is much more apparent than for an organization that already has some digital documents stored in email, on a local area network, and unfortunately, on multiple users' local hard drives (faux digital). While both are in vastly different states of document management, much of the approach to convert to a digital document management system is the same.

Within the relatively short span of about 25 years, technological advances have taken us from the "bag" phone to the iPhone®, from the computer terminal to the personal computer, and from the notepad to the iPad®. Along with these advances has come the pervasive availability of Internet access. Together, these simultaneous developments have changed how data is shared and how we communicate. Trouble is, many businesses have either failed to recognize this megatrend or have chosen to ignore it.

For example, most individuals have become accustomed to personal online banking. In most cases, no one gives a second thought to managing one of their most important assets — their cash — in this way. It is not unusual for a person to check account balances online from a computer or phone. In addition, some banks now offer mobile applications that even allow deposits to be made from a smart phone. And nearly all bills can be paid utilizing an online bill-pay service that eliminates the need for writing checks. Most people find these cloud-based services both a convenience and a time-saver in managing their daily lives.

Yet when a discussion ensues about utilizing the enormously advantageous aspects of cloud-based computing to operate their businesses, these same individuals hesitate or balk at the idea of their data being somewhere else or not physically under their control. However, cloud-based applications in most cases have far more advanced security monitoring, security controls, intrusion detection, and security management services in place than most businesses could even venture to consider in their own local installations.

While some organizations could argue that they don't need to utilize cloud-based applications because of their current IT infrastructure and IT personnel, most businesses could vastly improve their security, disaster recovery capabilities, document management, email, client service and interaction, and many other IT functions, if their organization utilized cloud-based computing.

Take document management, for example. If the document management system is cloud-based, the ability to access the data by both the organization's end users and its clients or customers is vastly enhanced, while avoiding exposing the local organization's IT infrastructure to outside parties. The documents can be accessed 24/7 with local computers, tablets, and smartphones. In addition, this cloud-based approach provides the organization with much more flexible storage options to accommodate expansion and growth in the number of required documents that have to be retained.

# The Four Keys to Successful Implementation

## 1. Think "Process Improvement", not "Technology"

Regardless of the present state of an organization's document management system (paper or faux digital), transitioning to a truly digital document management system is more than just a technology initiative. The entire transition has to be thought of as a process improvement that encompasses all documents, standard categorization, naming conventions and rapid document retrieval.

All processes that relate to the creation, storage, and retrieval of a document must be reviewed and enhanced to:

- Eliminate wasted steps.
- Avoid unnecessary printing or publishing of documents.
- Prevent duplication of documents via multiple storage locations.
- Establish standard naming conventions.
- Ensure uniformity of approach.

## 2. Identify the Change Master

Identify someone in the organization with an understanding of the applicable work processes along with the ability to manage and direct the transition. This "Change Master" needs to be someone of significant enough decision-making authority to prevent the transition process from stalling. The Change Master would also be responsible for communicating why business processes are changing to other key decision makers. This is usually not someone purely technologically driven.

## 3. Go All In or Forget It

When a decision is made by an organization to truly implement a digital document management system, it is critical that the decision apply to all aspects of the organization. While different sections of the organization can be transitioned or implemented using a phased-in approach, excluding some sections from the document management initiative creates inefficiencies when common documents need to be shared between different sections. In some instances, resentment and resistance can arise when sections of an organization are not included in the process.

## 4. The End is the Beginning

When a big initiative such as deciding on a digital document management system and process is taken on, a great deal of time is spent on all the various stratification of data that could be stored and retrieved from the system. While it is important to consider classification of various documents, this often leads to confusion on the part of the end user. The final document to be retrieved should be easily located predominantly by its name. Therefore, the best approach to take from the beginning is to give a document a name that accurately and complete describes it — making it easy to find and retrieve. In addition, the document should be created and edited from the location in the document management system where it is to always be stored and retrieved. This simple approach to naming and locating documents from the very beginning will ensure they end up where they should always belong.

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## About Mike Johnson

Michael (Mike) W. Johnson, CPA.CITP may very well be one of the original ChangeMongers. Mike entered the business world working for international and regional CPA firms when pencil and paper were standard-issue tools. Always interested in change, Mike was an early adopter of technological innovations such as the personal computer, local area networking and mobile computing to enhance performance in both his professional and personal endeavors. Now some 35 years later, Mike has vast experiences with the challenges and benefits that come from embracing the rapidly changing business and personal world we encounter today. Mike has traveled both nationally and internationally assisting firms with adoption of new technologies and change management and enjoys sharing his knowledge through speeches, webinars, and storytelling. www.changemongers.com

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