

Hello. It looks like you're using an ad blocker that may prevent our website from working properly. To receive the best experience possible, please make sure any blockers are switched off and refresh the page.

If you have any questions or need help you can email us

# Establishing Standards for the Paperless Office

Jul. 27, 2012

A paperless accounting practice is in many regards very similar to one based on paper, although it will be much more efficient if good practices and standards are implemented during the transition to paperless. Many firms start the move to paperless by scanning documents and storing them on a hard drive in some sort of homegrown folder structure. This gets the process started, but standards are hard to enforce and implement. Problems with this approach include:

- No enforceable naming structure for client folders and documents
- Minimal and difficult to use security features
- Weak and frequently unusable workflow processes
- Lack of granular security control
- No efficient document capture methods
- No way to efficiently and securely share documents with clients
- Ability to remotely access documents

Most of these problems occur because there is no way to force a user to name a document or apply security in a standard way. If someone gets in a hurry or simply forgets, it is quite simple to name a file incorrectly, file it in the wrong folder, and/or apply security incorrectly. In addition, there is no way to workflow a document through a business process effectively. Typically, Adobe or some other package is used to scan documents one at a time, with no sort of batch input.

In order to overcome the shortfalls of using a Windows Explorer structure, it is best to start with an electronic document management system (EDMS) which has the feature set to overcome the issues raised above. In general, most mid to high end document management systems should allow you the ability to:

- Create document templates with default naming and security
- Effectively control document security and provide an audit log
- Effectively provide workflow (both rules-based and ad hoc)
- Provide granular security classes for both client folders and documents
- Provide multiple capture points for documents (either paper or electronic)
- Provide easy secure access for authorized personnel (both local and remote)

## **Document Templates**

Document templates provide a standardized method of entering document descriptions and applying security/retention and other settings. Default values should automatically be added to the description and minimal data entry by the document creator should be required. Required data fields are a must so key information is not ignored or forgotten. The goal of a document template is to provide a fast, easy and intuitive method to file a document with the minimum number of steps.

They also insure documents are named correctly and consistently no matter who is filing the document, making it much easier to find the document later with minimum effort. Remember, a large part of filing documents correctly to begin with is to have the ability to retrieve them later as quickly as possible. Security settings allow documents to only be accessed by authorized personnel and retention policies protect a document from being edited or deleted in accordance to regulations or company policies.

## **Workflow**

Virtually every business has documents that flow through some kind of work process. Expense reports, purchase orders, and travel requests are some common examples. As the document passes from one person or department to the next, someone acts on the information and files it or passes the document on for review or further action. The process of accurately tracking the document's progress from its originator through to its final destination is known as document workflow management. Ideally, this process is started when the document is filed in the document management system. Once again we move to the document template. A good EDMS

should provide a method to automatically workflow the document based on the document template selected. Document templates are capable of doing a number of things automatically without user intervention.

*Tip: A good EDMS should apply naming conventions, security classes and any necessary workflow at the time the document is added to the system. This prevents a user from neglecting any of these items out of haste or ignorance (particularly if these items can be applied automatically without user input).*

## **Capture**

Entering documents into an EDMS can be a challenging task. More and more of the documents are arriving at firms in electronic format without any paper copies. This is fine as long as the EDMS has a way of importing or batching these documents into the system without a lot of user interaction. Most vendors will have an import utility which can be used to file the documents in the correct location according to document templates as mentioned above.

Document Capture is an integral part of any solution to the paper problem we all face. It usually consists of an input device (scanner), software to assist in sorting and identifying (indexing) the paper, and storage (disk space) to file the electronic documents for retrieval. Beyond simple document capture (imaging), many things can be done during the capture process to automate the process. Barcode recognition, database lookup, forms processing, and OCR are all advanced methods of capture that can boost productivity during the capture process. Finding a knowledgeable vendor to help analyze the capture process is critical to successfully implementing a solution.

## **Document Access**

The last standard implementation piece for an EDMS is to provide reasonable and effective retrieval of documents from a variety of sources. Users today are more mobile and the vendors should provide the firm with a way of accessing their documents from a variety of sources even external to the firm. They should also provide the necessary tools to share client's documents securely with the clients without using email. Email is unsecure and can be unwieldy once documents reach a certain size. A good solution is to have an EDMS that has an embedded branded portal capability which allows a firm employee to share documents back and forth with clients quickly and securely in the cloud.

Implementing an EDMS can be a challenging task, but once standards are developed by the firm in conjunction with the selected vendor, it can make the firm much more efficient. This allows it to add clients without increasing the number of employees as each employee can process more information. It is crucial the EDMS support as many of the document standards as possible without requiring user intervention for the system to be readily accepted.

*Andrew Bailey has 20 years of experience in the software industry. Currently, he is president of Cabinet (formerly Cabinet NG), a document management provider based in Madison, Alabama. Andrew can be reached at [abailey@cabinetpaperless.com](mailto:abailey@cabinetpaperless.com). For more information visit [www.cabinetpaperless.com](http://www.cabinetpaperless.com).*

Article

CPAPA is registered with the National Association of State Boards of Accountancy (NASBA) as a sponsor of continuing professional education on the National Registry of CPE Sponsors.

© 2023 Firmworks, LLC. All rights reserved