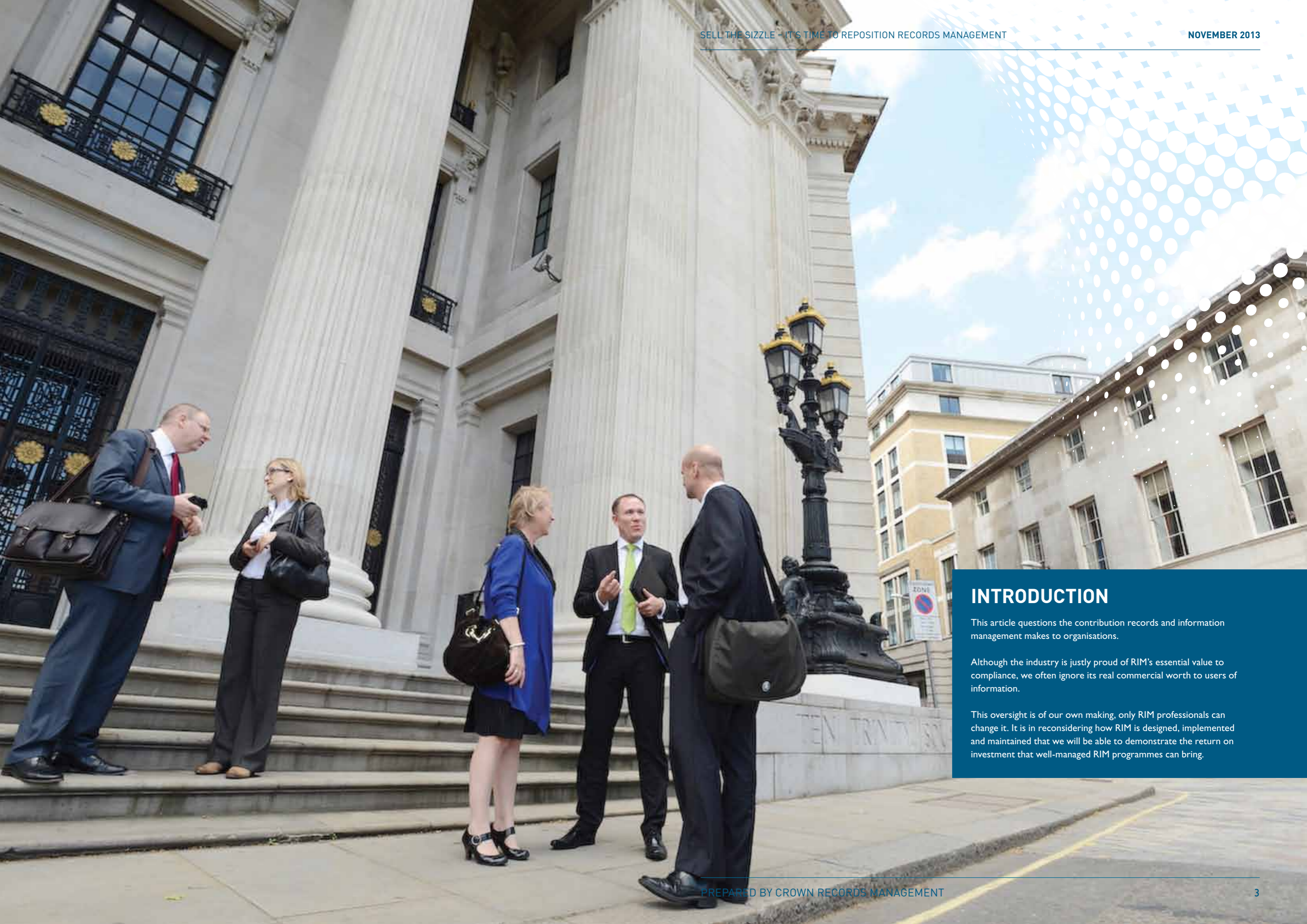


SELL THE SIZZLE – IT'S TIME TO REPOSITION RECORDS MANAGEMENT

The power of memory

CROWN 
RECORDS MANAGEMENT



INTRODUCTION

This article questions the contribution records and information management makes to organisations.

Although the industry is justly proud of RIM's essential value to compliance, we often ignore its real commercial worth to users of information.

This oversight is of our own making, only RIM professionals can change it. It is in reconsidering how RIM is designed, implemented and maintained that we will be able to demonstrate the return on investment that well-managed RIM programmes can bring.

IS IT TIME TO REPOSITION YOUR RECORDS MANAGEMENT OFFER?

How about a quick game of word association? What are the first words you would associate with records management? Compliance? Obligation? Regulation?

What if I were to ask who the main beneficiaries of a corporate records management programme should be? Chances are, you'll think management, lawyers and auditors.

So far, so unsurprising. After all, what is records management for, if not for keeping the organisation out of court, and out of trouble? It may be over a decade since it hit the headlines, but the name of Enron still resonates in many a boardroom. While in the public sector, the Freedom of Information Act more recently ushered in an era of greater transparency, shining a spotlight on the power of records as evidence.

Records management clearly has a vital role in protecting the assets and interests of any organisation. Effective records and information management ensures that information can be located and accessed quickly and efficiently when required, and that records which are no longer needed are disposed of in a controlled and defensible way.

So is RIM merely an exercise in risk management? It is tempting for records managers to take comfort from that idea. If RIM is inextricably linked to corporate accountability and good governance that must ensure a continued relevance to management, regardless of fluctuating trends in business or technology?

But it would be a mistake to view respect for such obligations as absolute or universal. Firstly, attitudes to risk differ among industries and from one organisation to another. Having worked in the pharmaceutical industry and in higher education, I have experienced life at both ends of the spectrum. The one a highly regulated environment, with no appetite for risk, the other, one where regulation is present, but considered more lightly by the majority of staff.

Attitudes towards compliance also vary. When balance sheets are healthy, more resource is devoted to meeting compliance issues, but in harsher economic times where budgetary constraints are enforcing cuts to core operations and front line services, management can feel forced to take a harder line. In one recent case, a UK chief constable admitted that cuts would only affect the back office – which, when pressed, he identified as “those who process records.” In tough times, it might not take much for compliance to be viewed as the equal to bureaucratic red tape.

ARE YOU ADDING VALUE?

Like it or not, many in business and government view economic growth, whether through productivity, efficiency or entrepreneurship, as the priority. This doesn't mean regulation or protecting our legal interests are unimportant, but it may mean that management will view records management in a different light – and perhaps we should too.

What matters most to organisations is value – something records management is very poor at demonstrating. In the many case studies on vendor websites, there are few robust studies to prove the commercial worth of RIM. They often rely on anecdotal or unrepresentative evidence, or they show improvements to efficiency, but fail to mention the costs of implementation.

When we talk to people, when we make pitches for funding, when we try to justify our existence and sell the benefit, we have to do a better job. We cannot rely on compliance – it's important, but let's not be defined by it. Records management can do more to demonstrate its relevance. Instead, let us focus on the value we either do, or could, offer to the organisation – and on proving it. We may take records management in a new direction, require a new mind set, new tools and new skills, but the reward of greater corporate focus would be worth it.

SELL THE SIZZLE, NOT THE SAUSAGE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Bailey a prominent RIM consultant who is well-known in the records and information management arena, leads a varied portfolio of work, including major initiatives on institutional strategy. Steve was director of the Records Management Society (2002-03) and a member of the Department for Education and Skills FOI Sector Group, and Ministry of Justice's Information Rights User Group. As well as being a member of other working groups in the industry, in 2010 Steve was invited by the US government's accountability office to be part of an expert panel reviewing the work of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

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I started this paper by asking who are the real beneficiaries of records management. I wonder if you immediately thought of users. All too often our users are the forgotten audience in records management. For decades, we have sought recognition for RIM as a corporate-wide function, with the organisation as its customer. Think: enterprise content management systems; corporate file plans, company retention schedules, and you get the point – we instinctively think big. But we must be careful that our focus on the enterprise is not at the expense of our users. Indeed our success in achieving the former is linked to serving the needs of the latter.

Most employees want to turn up to work, do the best job they can, as easily as they can, and finish on time at the end of the day. Of course, corporate compliance and legal interests are relevant to them, but it's not front of mind. People simply want tools that will help them to manage the information they need more easily. It shouldn't be too much to ask you would think, but it's astonishing how often it takes a back seat.

We often ask a lot of information users when it comes to implementing record management solutions. We ask them to change the way they

create information, and we re-organise things in ways that are unfamiliar to them. We even ask them to permanently delete things they may instinctively feel it would be better to keep.

We may see those changes as necessary measures, for the good of the organisation, but from the perspective of the individual they can seem like a whole lot of disruption – measures which, when combined, make their daily working life more difficult, not less. Is it any wonder record management system implementations fail when they fail to engage with the users of the system? It's time to stop taking people for granted, and ignoring their complex needs and requirements.

Successful records management must always be a partnership – a blend of organisational requirements and user needs. It is in understanding these two different – occasionally contradictory – strands, that the real challenge for records management lies. It is rare that people can successfully be coerced into fully and accurately complying with new modes of working with information. It is surely far better to offer solutions that patently meet an articulated need and/or solve a pressing problem and let take up take care of itself.

Beyond its necessity for maintaining compliance, and mitigating risk, I believe we can prove that records management is desirable and a contributor to value. And to do so requires us to focus more of our attention on solving problems at the desk level as well as the boardroom.

We must work harder to establish our reputation. We have to be seen as a service which offers a clear return on investment, and one that consistently finds practical solutions to genuine problems. Only then will we begin to make a contribution to every organisation, which cannot be ignored, or taken away.

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