WHAT IS A RECORDS MANAGEMENT SYSTEM?

All organizations have manual and computer-assisted processes for dealing with records. A records management system tracks the “events” during a record’s life cycle from creation, active use, transformation to another format, to inactive storage and final disposal.

The typical records management system is not limited to a set of policies or procedures, or a database, but includes a wider range of components:

- **People** – the actions we take and decisions made by people within and outside the organization influence the lives of records
- **Support, available from training, education, maintenance** – systems develop over time and have to accommodate changes in law or business practice
- **Policies, processes and procedures** approved and disseminated
- **Tools** such as retention schedules, disposal authorization forms, classification schemes, tags and security levels
- **Technology** – e.g. databases, screen layouts, websites, tagging methods, indexes, search algorithms, scanning and imaging, workflow, office suite applications, enterprise document management systems, content management systems and enterprise resource planning systems

All these parts of a records management system help people to file, describe, label, store, transform, find, retrieve, check-in, check-out and dispose of records. This common approach makes it possible to share records effectively.

A records management system provides ways to find and use the records your organization needs.
UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STRUCTURED AND UNSTRUCTURED INFORMATION

A records management system is concerned with unstructured information: the documents, emails, spreadsheets, presentations, drawings, diagrams, notes, calendars, photographic images, digital recordings and videos that people may create easily and without much control.

Unstructured activity – Every organization creates mountains of information which falls outside the strict management of database-driven systems.

These are not the structured records which can be found inside the databases of enterprise resources planning (ERP) systems. Structured records might include vendor and account records in a financial accounting system, customer contact records in a customer relationship system, employee records in human resource systems and order, sale and delivery records in supply chain systems.

Structured records are highly controlled and are often validated against rules and templates to describe a specific process or event.
Unstructured records frequently support the transactions and processes being captured as structured records in ERP systems. These days, almost all unstructured records are born-digital, in office software as documents, spreadsheets and presentations, or in software tools for drawing, recording, creating diagrams or project tracking.

Few records are created manually with pen and paper or a film camera. Nevertheless, many digital records are subsequently printed, often photocopied and then filed in binders or folders and kept in file rooms, cabinets or boxes at off-site records storage locations.

A great advantage of paper records is that they are easy to arrange as a group, to describe and to store. They don’t require much special equipment besides a table and a light to read and use them. It seems unlikely that paper records will disappear anytime in the near future.

However, paper records may not always be filed well. They may be kept as piles of loose papers or tied up with string or clipped together in a variety of ways with a descriptive label attached.

When paper records are scanned they are transformed into digital records. In most circumstances, a paper record will have a digital copy. This makes it difficult to know which is the official record: the first born-digital record, the printed record or the scanned version.

Records management systems use policy, process, taxonomy, tagging and training to define and communicate to people in the organization how to determine which is the official record in a particular circumstance or situation.
The most common place to store digital records is on shared drives or personal hard drives. Shared drives are common because they are easy to set up and inexpensive to purchase and maintain. Traditionally, shared drives are set up within the walls of an organization, but increasingly shared drives may exist in "the cloud", with access via a subscription service.

People like shared drives because they are convenient for quickly filing digital records. The shared drive uses a hierarchical folder structure that, at first, most people find easy to understand and use. People create their own folders and place digital records inside them. All too often, a hierarchical folder structure becomes confusing, containing too many levels and folder names that many people do not understand and will not use. People stop using one section of the hierarchy and create another section that they understand.

Over time, many shared drives become full of dead folders and digital records that no one claims or remembers. A shared drive therefore requires manual processes to keep it from becoming an ever-larger, more entangled and difficult-to-use graveyard of unneeded and under-used folders full of digital records.

A records management system will use processes and procedures for centrally creating folders according to a standard number of hierarchical levels and a naming convention for each folder. For example, folders might be created by the system at levels one, two and three and only at level four may the typical employee create a unique folder.

Despite their convenience, shared drives hold minimal information about each digital record – title, format and date last saved are normally all that can be seen. A records management system will use a combination of policy and training to promote the use of standardized naming conventions for each digital record. For example, avoiding acronyms, keeping titles to fewer than 50 characters and beginning with the date created in YYYYMMDD format. The manual processes needed to manage a shared drive effectively soon overtake the initial convenience.
THE ADVANTAGES OF ELECTRONIC DOCUMENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS (EDMS)

Electronic document management systems (EDMS) have many advantages over shared drives for holding digital records.

But EDMS entails a trade-off: it requires much more effort when creating and filing digital records, in exchange for less effort when retrieving and disposing of digital records.

An EDMS has the potential to hold detailed descriptive information, called metadata (or information about the information), on each digital record. Some of the metadata may be collected transparently from the person using the EDMS. It may record the name of the person doing a task, date of the task and department of the person doing the task, based on log-in details and user profiles in the EDMS. In addition, the person who is doing the task may enter some metadata manually – he/she might, for example, choose a classification or a descriptive tag from a prepared list. But the experience of organizations using EDMS suggests that people will resist if there are too many manual processes. As a rule of thumb, an EDMS user should only be asked to provide five pieces of information when adding a new digital record:

- Title
- Owner, if different from the creator, which was captured transparently
- Classification from a taxonomy
- Descriptive metadata tag(s) from a drop-down list
- Security level tag from a drop-down list

Motivating people to use the EDMS becomes an important goal for the organization’s records managers. A person may create a digital record and save it into an EDMS, or drag and drop digital records from a shared drive or from an email box into an EDMS. Both are manual processes and require policy, process, training and maintenance so that people know what to put into the EDMS, how to do it and when to do it.

An EDMS is likely to have a separate records management module that requires regular maintenance to keep it functioning smoothly: adding and updating record retention schedules, updating the list of metadata tags, adding and deleting user accounts and other such tasks. An organization’s records management system helps people using an EDMS by training, supporting and monitoring them to ensure that they know how to use the EDMS effectively and efficiently.
A records management system can help people to separate useful records from useless records. People who work with records know that there are too many records being created and retrieved and that many of the records are not useful. Frequently, records are difficult to find, retrieve and dispose of. The records management system for both paper and electronic records assists by operating in four areas:

1. **Policies, Processes and Procedures**
   - Identify official records from casual copy records
   - Describe how to create, approve and maintain a records retention schedule
   - Define ownership of a record
   - Define when to create a record
   - Define active records and how to describe them for use
   - Describe how to pack an active record for off-site storage
   - Describe how to tag an inactive digital record for putting in a electronic archive
   - Describe how to find and retrieve a record from inside the office and from off-site storage
   - Define security levels with enough detail to define who will have access to single, unique, individual records
   - Define who in the organization will approve the purchase or development of records management tools and technology
   - Describe the disposal process for records

2. **Tools**
   - The records manager has important tools at his/her disposal which provide certainty and can make life easier for everyone:
     - Classify a record using metadata, taxonomy and security levels
     - Cross-reference using thesauri across the descriptions of records
     - Maintain a retention schedule detailing how long, in what format and where to retain records
     - Map ownership, department, classification to security levels
     - Map retention schedules to official records

3. **Technology**
   - Using the available technology, typically software and systems, makes sense, but it’s not a free-for-all:
     - Control access to a record, including when it can be seen, opened or shared
     - Make barcodes and descriptive labels for records
     - Create a searchable index to records based on title, metadata, classification, format and past events
     - Make pick-lists of active official records ready for storage or disposal
     - Create a pick-list of inactive official records in storage ready for disposal
     - Keep an inventory of active records in the office or in electronic storage
     - Keep an inventory of inactive records in off-site storage or electronic archives
     - Remember who created a record
     - Remember who placed a record in off-site storage or electronic archives
     - Remember who checked-out a record from off-site storage or electronic archives
     - Remember when a record was returned and checked-in to off-site storage or electronic archives
     - Remember who approved and when; how and when records were disposed of or transferred to historical archives

4. **Support from training, education and maintenance**
   - No system can operate effectively without buy-in from everyone using it. It’s important to recognize that many people see records management systems as an obstacle to efficient business. The organization, including senior management, must do everything it can to help:
     - New employee training on records management policy, tools and technology
     - All employees receive on-going training and provide regular feedback on how well or how poorly the system is working for them
     - Records management staff and departmental coordinators monitor, audit and report to senior management on compliance with the records management system
     - Records management staff and departmental coordinators recommend steps to improve compliance with the records management system
Many of the tools and technologies of records management systems are available as off-the-shelf, out-sourced services or may be developed in-house. Every organization needs to make a choice between the following, when it starts out on its records management system journey:

1. Should we buy a set of tools and technologies, configure, install and use them?
2. Should we outsource a set of tools and technologies and integrate them with our own organization?
3. Or should we develop our own set of tools and technologies?

Making the right decision requires an understanding of the organization’s information technology infrastructure, management and risk culture, current records environment, number and type of employees and number of geographic operational locations.

A dedicated group inside the organization responsible for records management should collect and record the answers to the straightforward questions presented below.

An external consultant may help them collect and collate the responses. Going over the responses with a small team made up of finance, management, information technology and at least two other functional groups will provide the context of records management within the organization. The group can then make a decision in respect of buying, out-sourcing or developing in-house tools and technologies based upon the following knowledge:

1. How many employees do we have at each location?
2. How many employees in each job-grade, job ranking or job-level at each location?
3. How many linear meters of filing do paper records at each location occupy?
4. How many off-site storage locations do we now use?
5. How many storage locations do we manage?
6. Are we using vendors to provide off-site storage locations?
7. How many vendors provide off-site storage locations?
8. Are we able to easily place records into storage and retrieve them?
9. What email system(s) do we use?
10. How many email servers do we have?
11. How many emails do we create and receive each day?
12. How many emails do we have in our servers? How many of them have attachments?
13. How many share drive servers do we have?
14. How many records are in these share drive servers in total and by format?
15. What is the megabyte size range of files on these share drives?
16. How close to capacity are our email servers and share drive servers?
17. Do we have Enterprise Document Management Systems (EDMS) or Content Management Systems (CMS)? Describe them in detail.
18. Do we have Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems? Describe them in detail.
19. Do our ERP systems have repositories for documents, spreadsheets and presentations inside them and/or can links be made to these sorts of records?
20. Do we use web-based applications or intranets? Describe them in detail.
21. Do we outsource any applications now to SaaS, software as a service, providers? Describe them in detail.
22. How do we back-up our information technology systems? Describe in detail.
23. What policies, processes and procedures do we have in place for managing records?
24. Are we currently involved in any legal proceedings, lawsuits or litigation?
25. Have we been involved in any legal proceedings lawsuits or litigation in the past? Did we require records for these legal proceedings?

Tools and technology are only successful when used along with policies, processes, procedures and support from training, education and maintenance.

Policies and support can be developed with help from external consultants and local records management groups and associations. But for them to be successful they must become embedded into the records management culture of the organization.

Crown Records Management can assess your current environment and practices and make practical suggestions on how to create and improve a records management system that covers both digital and paper records.