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Bill Leslie

Document archiving: Choosing the right solution

Six things to look for when selecting a document management system

March 24, 2014

by *Bill Leslie*

I recently called a company in another state that I do business with. It's a large company with dozens of customer service representatives. I needed to talk to someone about some documents that I had mailed to the company. After I had a real person on the phone, which fortunately didn't take long, she said, "One moment, please." A few seconds later, she said, "I'm ready, sir; I have your letter and documents in front of me."

I was impressed. I had expected to be transferred two or three times, explaining my situation over and over. I thought there was slim chance that I would ever speak with someone who could find my documents. This company was obviously using a document management and archiving system, and was using it well. With my documents at her fingertips, it was a simple matter to take care of business, and less than two minutes later, I hung up, a happy customer.

A decade ago, only large companies could afford a digital document management system. Not anymore. Today, even small companies need an archiving solution. Fortunately, because of changes in technology, inexpensive systems are available for businesses of all sizes.

Here are six things to look for in choosing a document management system:

1. The system should be flexible and adaptable to the way that you run your business. You should be able to quickly retrieve documents based on any criteria you choose. Invoice number? Customer name? Customer number? Order date? Your system should be able to retrieve a document using any of these criteria and more. And you should be able to add new search criteria at your discretion, without cost and without contacting a programmer.
2. Choose a system that uses a common format for file storage, like JPEG or PDF. Some systems use a proprietary format that must be licensed—for a hefty fee. Proprietary formats particularly pose a problem if you ever try to move to another document management system. Your documents could be held hostage. You might have to continue to pay a fee to the old service or lose access to your documents. Choose a company that offers complete document portability. If you ever decide to change services, you should be able to get a complete archive of your documents that can be read on any computer, for a nominal fee.
3. The system should use an inexpensive, off-the-shelf scanner produced by a major electronics manufacturer. Some systems require that you use their proprietary hardware. You may pay too much for out-of-date hardware, and there may be hidden costs associated with that hardware. For example, you may be required to use one specific company to maintain the scanners, and if you don't keep full maintenance on the hardware, you may be turned away when you call for support. "Sorry, that seems to be a hardware problem, and you aren't on hardware support."
4. Your document solution should provide a high level of data security—in several ways. The best scanning solutions will back up your files to at least two physical servers, plus to the cloud. All documents should be encrypted with encryption keys that are unique for each document. For the best security, you should have at least eight-digit encryption, and 10- or 12-digit encryption is even better. You should be able to control which documents are available to which employees and to change access quickly, without paying a programmer. This is important when an employee quits or is transferred to another department. You should be able to limit access to specific IP addresses to limit your exposure if your computer system is hacked.
5. Some solutions use a centralized scanning solution. They are designed to have documents collected from multiple locations and sent to one or two large, expensive scanners. That's an inefficient solution. There will be delays in scanning documents while they travel to the scanning station. If an employee goes on vacation or gets sick, a huge mountain of documents may pile up.

Some documents, like payroll and human resources, shouldn't be seen by anyone outside of the department that originated the document. Getting the original documents back to the right person in the right department is time-consuming.

To be effective, a scanning solution should involve daily scanning by various employees, as a normal part of their work. That means small, affordable scanners scattered throughout your building, right on the employees' desktops.
6. Choose a company that is not closely affiliated with any particular industry. For example, in the automotive industry, each of the major dealership system providers has developed its own "in house" system. But your businesses don't all fit neatly into one industry niche. You want one solution that will work for all of your businesses.

Scanning can provide huge benefits in efficiency and customer satisfaction—if you pick the right scanning solution.

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Bill Leslie, MBA, is a consultant to family-owned businesses and other closely held corporations. He lives in Sandy, Ore.

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**Current Published
Version : 3983**