When you are immersed in day-to-day business operations, optimizing your content management strategies doesn’t necessarily fall high on your list of priorities. It is often difficult to know where to start and—equally as important—where to expend your resources. That said, however, the “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” mentality is no longer a valid approach for any business that hopes to remain competitive.

Enterprise content management (ECM) involves much more than going paperless. According to AIIM, ECM involves “technologies, tools, and methods used to capture, manage, store, preserve, and deliver content across an enterprise.” At the heart of ECM is your organization’s ability to access, monitor, and process your information as efficiently as possible. Included below are some recommendations for success from professionals who, between them, have almost 25 years of experience developing and implementing ECM solutions.

**Communication: The cornerstone to a successful ECM implementation**

Without extensive communication, ECM implementations are often doomed. Successful implementations involve people from all levels of an enterprise as part of their planning strategy. This ensures proper alignment of business and IT goals. Including representatives from different areas of your enterprise will also allow you to set protocols for effective indexing, and to develop the criteria that differentiate records from other business documents. Having representatives from different areas of your enterprise will also help you to document specific processes. Eventually, you will need to communicate the complex nature of your processing details to an ECM vendor.

The project manager should provide a detailed picture of the implementation process and timeline for the managers, sponsors, and project team members. Users might be experiencing trepidation that workflow and automation will threaten their jobs. Address these fears up front so that users have confidence in both the project and in the ECM environment. Make the transition exciting, and convey the reality that your ECM implementation will ultimately make users’ jobs easier.

Help desk and IT staff also need to be kept in the loop. Even though your IT personnel will not be using your ECM software on a day-to-day basis, they will have responsibilities in terms of backups and data migration. They need to know whether additional IT resources (new servers, scanners, or other hardware) will be required throughout the different stages of your ECM implementation. Help desk staff also needs to know how to support the new product.

**Proper planning: Prevent pitiful performance and potentially perturbed people**

Several years ago, a site asked us to set up workflow and to perform workflow training as part of their ECM implementation. In preparation for that, we tried to get an idea as to how one of their business processes worked. Our contact never gave us the information that we requested. Instead, he supplied a single sheet of tablet paper that illustrated four or five workflow steps. We had the experience to know that there was far more to the process than what this site had supplied for us. Because that organization had not planned in advance to supply the intricate details of their workflow process, the electronic implementation of the workflow took much longer than it should have. Improper planning also compromised the level of detail that could be supplied for this organization’s initial training on the new software.

Planning is another area in which many ECM implementations tend to fall short—particularly with respect to the scope of the project. “Scope creep”—uncontrolled additions to the project without corresponding modifications to the project resources, schedule, or budget—should be avoided at all costs. If additional
functionalities are required, plan to implement them down the line when the time constraints, resources, and management capabilities are better aligned with the project rollout.

As part of your planning process, decide whether you want to implement ECM all at once (throughout the entire enterprise), or whether you want to implement the technology incrementally (department by department). In our experience, organizations that choose the latter method tend to have better success. Often, different departments use similar types of data. However, the ways in which they use the data can vary dramatically between departments. In simultaneous ECM rollouts, there is a danger that different departments will focus solely on their specific processing needs and not consider the needs of the rest of the enterprise.

Organizations may have heterogeneous environments in terms of hardware, user abilities, software platforms, etc. An incremental transition allows resources to be allocated toward tasks such as fine-tuning and/or customizing training among the various groups.

**Functionality: Take a multi-tiered approach**
In terms of functionality, organizations again should emphasize planning and research. There is a wide variety of systems available; some are better suited for specific tasks than others. Be sure that your requirements are well-defined, and that any prospective system can meet those requirements from a business standpoint. Furthermore, you will need to look beyond your business objectives to ensure that a prospective system will help you to comply with Sarbanes-Oxley (SOX), the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), or other industry compliance standards.

Compliance issues can often be addressed in terms of the system infrastructure. For example, to ensure privacy measures, your system should be built using a three-tiered architecture so that users do not have direct access either to the database or the file storage. Users should be communicating through one server, such as a web server, which in turn is responsible for communicating with the other servers, such as the database server and the file storage. This type of functionality gives organizations an additional level of security; it is now more difficult for users to access information using tools outside of the ECM system that could compromise privacy. Such a system benefits the IT staff as well. Administration is eased, since most—if not all—of the administrative tasks are centralized.

Know your system requirements, and make sure that you have the infrastructure in place to ensure that your requirements will be met. For example, if your organization has to scan 20,000 pages per day, make sure that your scanning hardware setup is going to support that—whether you plan to use one scanner or whether the work will be divided among multiple scanners. Your overall throughput needs to meet your requirements. If your budget permits, plan to exceed those requirements, because there may be peak periods when actual processing needs surpass your estimates. This makes allowances for system growth, as well.

Make sure, too, that your ECM implementation has monitoring and reporting tools that can help you define potential bottlenecks in processing. Reporting tools ensure that what should be getting done is getting done. They help to monitor productivity levels, and give you a timeframe for different processing tasks. Monitoring helps you to identify potential processing inefficiencies, and to determine whether they can be rectified or whether they are due to factors that are beyond your control.

Also, make sure that your implementation has the ability to manage records and to manage the entire document lifecycle. Choose a system that allows you to automate records migration, storage, retention, and deletion so that compliance initiatives, auditing requirements, and e-discovery preparations can be met.

**Administration: Recommendations to ensure that your system runs smoothly**
A prospective ECM system should allow for zero installation and centralized administration. Be sure to select products that allow your IT staff to perform installations, upgrades and routine maintenance from a centralized location. They should never have to leave their desks. Administrators should schedule and perform regular backups and maintenance. All data should be backed up on a regular basis (at least weekly full backups with daily incremental backups) to redundant locations. Databases should be routinely backed up and monitored to maintain maximum efficiency.

Organizations should also establish business continuity and disaster recovery plans. Sometimes the sky really does fall. Plan out what it is going to take to get the business back up and running as quickly as possible when it does. An associated recommendation is to run regular fire drills. Don’t just make plans and decide that you’ve done your due diligence. Plans are nothing unless they are implemented. After implementing your plans, run periodic fire drills to make sure that the plans you’ve
implemented are being followed properly—this process can also uncover potential hidden flaws that can then be addressed in a timely manner. A hurricane strike is no time to find out that your disaster recovery plans have a fatal flaw. Don't leave the only copy of your recovery plan documentation in the building that has just been ripped apart by 100mph wind and rain.

Assure adequate knowledge transfer. Too often ECM environments are built by a small team of professionals who later move on to other projects or other jobs and take their intimate knowledge of the system with them. All pertinent details of systems need to be documented, and the documentation needs to be kept in well-known locations. Multiple staff members need to be able to perform all administrative tasks. Have the primary administrative staff take a hands-off approach to the system for a period of time to ensure that the rest of the administrative staff knows the necessary administrative tasks. Make sure all of the tasks—even those that are seemingly mundane, and those that are automated—are well documented. This allows you to bring to light gaps that exist between process and documentation so that they can be addressed.

Planning an enterprise implementation is an intricate feat. It takes thorough vision, communication, and a working knowledge of all of the diverse areas of your business. Talk to your industry colleagues regarding other implementations, and learn from their recommendations. Take advantage of the experience that vendors offer with their professional services teams. Ultimately, when your processes are automated and productivity is soaring, you will wonder how your organization ever flourished without ECM.

Since 1986, DocFinity has provided enterprise content management (ECM), business process management (BPM), adaptable workflow, and organizational collaboration software and services to business ranging from global corporations to local start-ups. DocFinity improves business performance through better information management, enabling better decision-making, improving responsiveness and customer service, and reducing operational expenses.