Five Key Steps to Implementing a Successful Document Management System

By

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The State of Document Management in Education

In the world of education, document and record retention is a necessity. Not only are educational institutions required to keep complete records on the performance and conduct of current students, but they must also maintain records on past students in case they are ever needed for reference. Employers, trade school and college application departments, government agencies and law enforcement officials are among the personnel who may need to access education documentation and records.

Currently, educational document and record retention processes are, by-and-large, still paper based. This is mainly because paper-based records systems have been in place for decades and remain in place despite the fact that digital technologies offer a more cost-effective and convenient solution.

The Issues with Paper-Based Records Retention

Two primary issues exist with paper-based records retention systems: 1) They require enormous amounts of paper, which have a negative environmental impact and 2) The amount of paper creates suboptimal use of human resources.

School employees spend countless hours generating, filing, sorting and retrieving paper documents and records, which taps vital financial resources. A school district employing 50 people wastes roughly $125,000 per year due to an inability to locate and retrieve information*. These effects are felt throughout the education system, particularly in public education, where the efficient use of resources is paramount. The problems associated with the paper-based record keeping system show that an easily accessible and more efficient alternative is needed.

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Additional problems become apparent when you consider the sheer amount of space these records take up. School boards are required to retain student records for many years, even decades, creating space issues to which no clear solution has yet emerged, unless you take into account the powerful and efficient answer offered by digital records management systems. However, digital records management has not yet been fully embraced by the educational sector for several reasons.
Barriers to Implementing a Digital Records Management System

Barrier #1: Perceived expense associated with the transition. It is true that existing records must be copied over to the digital system, and employees and administrators must be trained in the proper use of the software and database management tools, which both require time and resources. But consider the costs of the current paper-based records system.

- Filing or retrieving a single paper-based record can cost as much as $20 in labor
- Misfiled records can increase filing and retrieval costs by 600%
- Re-creating a damaged or lost record can exceed filing and retrieval costs by as much as 1000%

When you consider, on average, 7.5% of paper records are misfiled and an additional 3% get lost or destroyed, significant cost savings can be realized by converting to an electronic management system.

*Filing or retrieving a single paper-based record can cost as much as $20 in labor, while misfiled records can increase filing and retrieval costs by 600%*

Barrier #2: Concerns about the security of electronic records. Today’s document management systems have advanced security features that offer far better protection than a locked file cabinet or cardboard banker’s box. Once employees have been trained with a digital records management system, its superior efficiency and improved accessibility will become immediately apparent.

Barrier #3: Lack of awareness that alternatives exist. While it certainly will require an investment of both time and money to make the initial digital conversions, untold amounts of resources will be saved, making for a relatively quick and sizeable return on investment.

The practical benefits of instituting an electronic records management system are too important to be overlooked.
Benefits to Implementing a Digital Records Management System

**Benefit #1: Cost reduction.** In addition to effectively eliminating physical storage space requirements, electronic systems also sharply reduce the costs associated with traditional paper-based document storage and records management methods. On average, one filing cabinet can store 5,000 to 10,000 pages, and will take up 8 to 10 square feet of space in an office. By contrast, the same amount of information requires only 250 to 500 MB of electronic storage space, which can be purchased for about $10 and takes up virtually no office space at all.

**Benefit #2: Reduction in document retrieval times.** While it is possible to access paper records fairly quickly if they are stored onsite, it can take hours or even days to retrieve offsite records. Electronic records can be accessed instantly by authorized staff member, from any computer with an Internet connection.

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**Benefit #3: Convenience.** Electronic record-keeping also offers many more search options, since these systems can recognize any piece of information contained in the student’s file. Thus, employees have a far broader range of compatible search terms they can use, making the misplacement and loss of files far less likely.

**Benefit #4: Security.** While many administrators fear that digital storage of student files poses risks to privacy and security, the fact is that electronic records are far more secure than their paper-record counterparts. An electronic record-keeping system offers multiple levels of protection, requiring user authentication which is virtually impossible to breach. Electronic record management also improves internal security and can be set up so that only a handful of authorized users can perform actions such as file deletion.

**Benefit #4: Document Protection.** For educational institutions, document preservation is a perennial concern. While properly stored paper records have long lifetimes, they could still be destroyed in the event of a fire or other major disaster. Electronic files do not degrade over time at all, and they can be backed up on the Internet to ensure that they can quickly and easily be replaced in something happens to the hard drive or server on which they are stored.
These advantages go a long way towards creating a more efficient work environment for employees and helping staff provide faster service. Electronic document storage also ensures that institutions can remain fully compliant with both state and federal records retention requirements.

**Five Key Steps to Implementing an Electronic Document Management System**

1. Identify employees with the qualifications to implement the system and train staff in its proper use, or hire outside consultants with the necessary expertise.

2. Create a timeline for the implementation project, with specific goals and objectives for each step in the process.

3. Perform an inventory review of all paper-based documents to be entered into the system. These will need to be scanned for permanent digital storage.

4. Research providers of electronic document management services, and choose a company with special expertise in the field of education.

5. Carry out the plan created at the outset of the project, including the installation of software, the creation of user accounts with specific permissions for specific users, the training of all staff and employees in the proper use of the system, the scanning and entry of existing paper documents in the system, and the transition of all newly generated documents to the electronic format.

**Conclusion**

While transitioning from paper-based records management to a digital system will require some amount of upfront investment of both time and money, the long-term benefits provide an outstanding return on these investments with an enormous value proposition. Electronic document management is becoming the standard in many industries, and it provides educational institutions with superior efficiency, reliability and ease of access which helps boost efficiency, ensure compliance with document retention laws, and save a great deal of much-needed money.
Consider the following questions:

• What if you no longer had to worry about a catastrophic event destroying years of vital student records?

• What if you didn’t have to spend one more minute manually searching through cardboard boxes and filing cabinets to find a student record?

• What if you could feel confident that you were 100% compliant with your district’s record retention policy?

You may be a candidate for Coleman Data Solutions’ complimentary Signature Record Retention Evaluation. Feel free to contact us at 330-644-8899 or toll free at 800-929-7243 for more information.

About Coleman Data Solutions

Coleman Data Solutions is a nonprofit, information management organization that saves school districts from the crush of cardboard boxes and filing cabinets by scanning paper student records and returning organized, secure information available 24/7/365. Located in Akron, Ohio, Coleman Data Solutions is a social enterprise of Coleman Professional Services, a nationally recognized not-for-profit provider of behavioral health and rehabilitation programs. To learn more, visit www.coleman-data.com.

*IDC report, August 2001