

Sense-making for Records Managers: Taking a Leading Role in SharePoint Governance

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Summary

This case study of four SharePoint implementations within a single organization shows that applying sense-making framework Cynefin can help in good and bad times during project and may even anticipate surprising user-influenced ultimate solutions. Role of records managers in these implementations is elaborated and suggestions are made on how to improve their role in such projects and in organizations in general.

Key words: SharePoint Governance, Electronic Records Management, ERM, Cynefin, Project Management

Introduction

In the constant search of the “best practice” a records manager may find him or herself swimming in the infinite sea of information on the new paradigms and the frameworks and tools to tame these paradigms. One may find that the “records continuum” theory might be exactly the consoling answer to organizational chaotic electronic records management (ERM) while taking the agile approach to software development might just solve the impossibly complex arena of stakeholders wants and realistic budgetary possibilities. One particular article that has named ERM a “wicked” problem, thus provided comfort to those struggling and brought people issues into this arena up front (Childs and McLeod, 2013) has served as inspiration for this case study of four SharePoint implementations within a same organization. Whether SharePoint may appropriately address proper ERM is not the subject of this article but the different approaches to final solutions that may also evolve as an unplanned and unexpected result of same or similar implementations. In addition the role of records managers in the implementations will be highlighted.

* The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the STL.

Projects Background

The four SharePoint implementations were all coming from different organizational offices and were all requested by the users themselves. These were essentially all related to improvement of records management and thus required organizational records managers involvement and guidance. Detailed description of projects' nature is described in Table 1. along with information on whether a project team was assigned or not and finally the projects' duration. As records in question did not belong to the primary category of this organization's records directly related to its primary function but belonged to other two categories (records generated in relation to the primary function or administrative records category) SharePoint as organizational secondary ERM system was recommended while the long duration of projects can also be explained by the fact that these projects were not related to organization's primary functional priorities. Only in Project A was there determination to successfully close the project within reasonable time as records originated from one of the most important organizational offices and records registration depended on the project's success.

Table 1.

Project	Nature of Project	Project Team	Project Duration
A	Improvement of records management and collaboration	Yes	9 months
B	Creation of intranet presence; Improvement of records management and collaboration	Yes/No	6+ months (on-going)
C	Improvement of records management and business processes	No	6+ months (on-going)
D	Improvement of records management	Yes	6+ months (on-going)

Role of Records Managers in Projects

It is worth mentioning that Project A was initiated after records management short-comings were identified during organization-wide records survey that resulted in Content and Data Management Strategy¹ recommending (among others) targeted use of SharePoint for management of records with limited retention periods. Although records in Project A had longer or permanent retention periods the use of organizational primary ERM system for their management was not possible in due time, thus the SharePoint solution had to be tailored with export to another system in mind. In-place records management was chosen and due consideration was given to records file naming. In the process organization-wide content type and taxonomy controls were developed of which many other SharePoint projects benefited. This undertaking has also added time

¹ Special Tribunal for Lebanon. Content & Data Management Strategy: Ensuring the STL Legacy, June 2012

needed to complete the project. All other projects were requested specifically by the user offices and were coordinated by a SharePoint working group. Project Team for Project A consisted of users, information technology representatives and was led by records managers. During the implementation 65 different issues were identified. Table 2. shows the breakdown of whom the resolution of these issues was allocated:

Table 2. Number of allocated project issues by stakeholder in Project A; Records managers (RM) Information Technology staff (IT) and users.

Stakeholder	Number of Issues
RM	24
IT	6
RM and IT	4
RM and user	18
IT and user	1
User	8

As the technological administration of SharePoint content types (that include metadata definition) and taxonomy controls were assigned to records managers the number of issues assigned to them was very high. As the user decision was needed on a number of issues many of them had to be allocated to user and records managers as well.

Other projects also required attention of records managers although users were not always aware of the role they had in what they initially considered a purely an IT project.

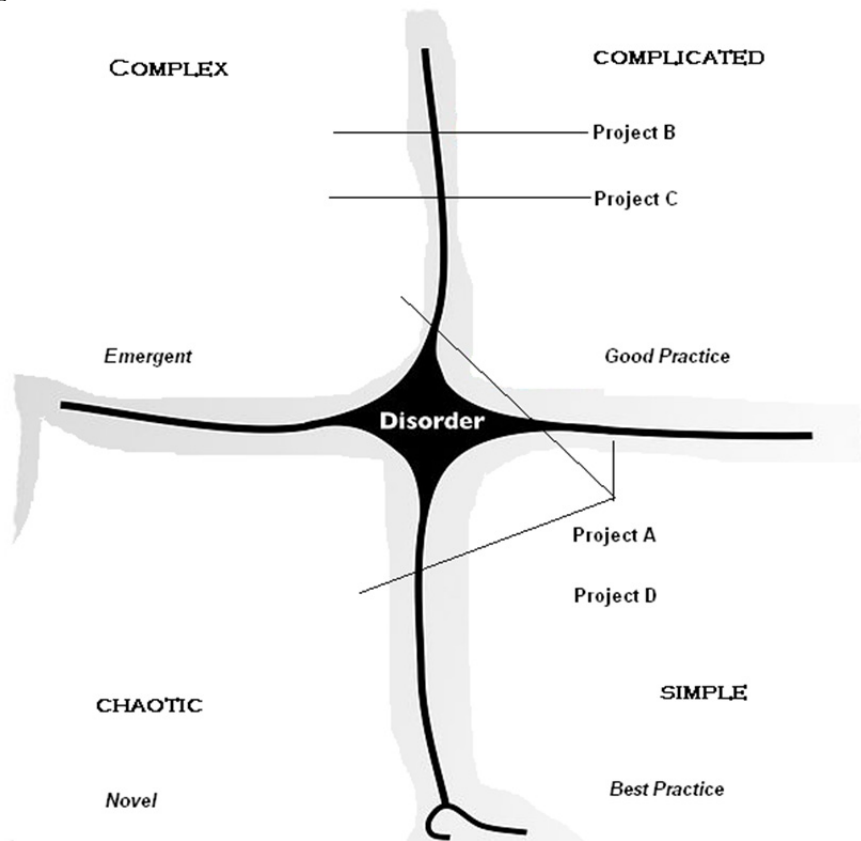
Retrospective application of Cynefin framework

Cynefin framework was developed by Dave Snowden as a sense-making model as oppose to a usual (matrix) categorization model (CognitiveEdge, 2011). It is a model that draws from knowledge management and complexity science (Childs and McLeod, 2013) and helps decision makers to make sense of a range of business problems and situations (Kurt and Snowden, 2003).

Child and McLeod (2013) as first in the field of records management use Cynefin to map people issues from their comprehensive AC+ erm project². In doing this they find that “[the framework] provides a different lens through which to view, makes sense of and re-perceive the ERM challenge and offers a strategic approach to accelerating change”. As Cynefin may be applied to analyse various situations it is used to retrospectively map all SharePoint implementation projects in Figure 1.

² <http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/acerm> (Access date: 30.08.2013)

Figure 1.



Project A as it was initiated as a simple records management improvement process may be placed in the simple domain as the solution was expected to be based on best practice as usually record management projects are. However when faced with the specific SharePoint environment the project issues resolutions had to be based on good practice where solution was good enough to work but far from perfect, for example enforcing column mandatory values through coding or even on emergent practice example of which is deriving a complex workflow for automatic filenaming. Finally close to the end of the project adoption issues emerged due to lack of time on most users' side which brought the project in chaotic domain. The situation was resolved by office administrator taking over all ERM responsibilities and performing records registration on behalf of all users. Such solution was never envisaged or planned, it was result of purely people factor – one’s attitude and self-initiative. The project has ended successfully with all stakeholders pleased with the final results and benefits.

Project B initially revolved around the creation of intranet presence however as the Intranet (SharePoint) working group was approving and overseeing the project records managers who are group's members guided the users on how to improve overall records management using the benefits of organizational metadata and taxonomy controls acquired during Project A. Thus it was expected that Project B will be either complicated or complex considering the large project scope and lessons learned during Project A. Project super-users were appropriately trained by both IT and RM staff and were given site owner permissions to manage their site independently.

Project C also started off as improvement of intranet presence however user recognized opportunity to improve both business processes and records management. As user possessed certain knowledge of programming he was able to run the project by himself requiring only limited IT and RM guidance and no direct assistance.

Finally Project D is placed in simple domain as its scope is limited to a fraction of office's records within single SharePoint library with no additional collaboration or any other requirements. It is assumed that this project will remain in simple domain as best practice acquired during Project A should cover the limited scope of Project D.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this brief case study was to show that using the Cynefin framework was possible in four different scenarios. Using such frameworks in projects may be very useful as they may provide direction even in most grave situations during an ERM system implementation. Furthermore it was demonstrated that people factor may be crucial for ultimate project solutions. Finally the underlying message is that records managers are in position to lead any ERM implementation, needless to say that it is their duty to greatly influence all ERM projects. Too often is their role undermined or non-existent while they may be in a perfect position to bridge the gap between users and IT in such projects by bringing in a strategic overview of information management needs and by gently relieving the overwhelming pressure on IT and ever so gently bringing user expectations to a reasonable level that would prevent unnecessary draining of organizational resources. Gaining project management skills or even software development skills (at least gaining insight into methodologies like Agile), applying frameworks and standards from other disciplines such as ITIL or perhaps rebranding themselves as recordkeeping informaticians (Upward et al, 2013) could surely strengthen the records managers role in organizations and ERM adoptions in particular.

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