

Content Management: What's in it for me?

Thomas Lites

Before you can understand what you can expect to get out of Content Management it's important that you're sure that we all agree on what Content Management is. Depending who you are talking to, the word 'content' can conjure up several, very different, meanings. It could mean a Microsoft Word document, an Excel spreadsheet, a video clip, a scanned image, or information found on a website. In one form or another, all definitions could be correct. The other part of Content Management is the management piece. Same applies here, depending who you are talking to, the word 'management' can mean different things. From storing and retrieving content, to applying security controls to stored content, and to keeping track of where content may be in a business workflow process or on a website, all definitions could be correct. Put them both together and the term, 'content management' screams for clarification.

One of the challenges often faced with trying to understand content management is first realizing its different forms. In a logical progression of technologies deployed to help manage unstructured information (i.e. non-database type information), CM has evolved from such earlier technologies as document management, document imaging, and even micrographics.

Think of how much information resides on reams of paper or in a file cabinet somewhere, that information can be invaluable to an organization for many reasons. This type of information is referred to as unstructured information. The challenge of acquiring, accessing, managing, and distributing unstructured information are a significant reason organizations looked first to micrographics, then to CM, document imaging, and document management technologies to assist in that endeavor. Today, the Internet is driving an ever-increasing need to provide fresh, timely, and relevant content to their websites. To that end, Web Content Management (WCM) solutions have emerged to assist. So what's the difference in these technologies, simply put, that can be thought of in the following manner and purpose:

Management Technology	Primary Purpose
Document Imaging	Manage hardcopy paper by scanning into a DI system, allowing multiple user access by searching on predefined indexes.
Document Management	Performs document imaging functions, plus extends the management to electronic files like word processing files, spreadsheets, reports. Some systems also allow library like functions to manage where documents are, who has them, and the versions of the documents. Advanced full text search is usually available in DM offerings. Built-in workflow and compound document support are available with some systems
Content Management	Extends document management to be more focused on a wider range of content. Some CM systems offer management and delivery of newer content streams as digital media, audio, streaming video.
Web Content Management	CM for the web. This technology is focused on helping organizations manage for websites. Depending on the system, web content management solutions can offer tools and processes to create, manage, personalize, and distribute (post) content (or information) to websites, PDA, cell phones, pagers, and other information delivery devices.
Enterprise Content Management	CM nirvana. Less a product, more of a complete end-to-end strategy for managing all of an organizations' content, no matter what it is and where it used. Ex: CM and web content management combined.

So how do you determine which form of CM is right for your goals? Here are 5 areas that you want to think about as you begin your planning and search:

- What am I trying to do with CM?
- What does my current / planned IT environment look like?
- Should I build or buy?
- Am I transforming my business? What are the issues I need to think about?
- How will I measure success and value?

Let's explore each of these questions in turn.

What am I trying to do with CM?

Because there are so many different definitions of content management, it's important that you clearly understand what it is you are trying to accomplish - and what you are not. Maybe you want to better manage your website(s). Perhaps it's just as simple as you need to recoup storage space and looking for a 'electronic file room' to store your company's information.

As exhibited in the above table there are variations on the CM theme. All have a purpose and are designed help address different challenges. Before you consider technologies, and there are plenty claims out there, you should be able to articulate your vision for CM in plain language. And if can't yet, go back to square one and keeping working through it. Work with colleagues; obtain upper management support and sponsorship, understand your rationale and purpose.

What does my current / planned IT environment look like?

You must understand is how technically prepared your organization is to adopt the CM implementation you are considering. By prepared I mean, is your IT infrastructure and technical plans compatible with what you are considering. You might not know, but this is very important to find out. Make sure you consult with IT. Its one thing for the business side to think that CM will be great for the business; it's another thing to have IT tell you that it can't be implemented.

At this point you might not have a clue which CM system you want, but you can be prepared with your technical prerequisites or desires. Are you a Microsoft only environment (e.g., .NET, ActiveX, SQL, Server, C++. etc)? Do you use Oracle as a company standard database? Are you an IBM shop (e.g., Java, DB2, etc)? Are your plans focused on e-business and the Internet? What are your network bandwidth concerns? Does IT develop internal applications, i.e. an investment in developers? If your CM purposes are to support your websites, how is it done today? Along with your vision for CM, are there any other IT biases you need to know about so you can develop your checklist for potential CM candidates.

Should I build or buy?

Along with your budget, this is related to your organizations IT capabilities and the type of CM you have planned to implement. There are organizations that have a preference in developing in-house. Some feel they can develop exactly the solutions they need at a better costs benefit than purchasing commercial off-the-shelf software that may be overkill for them.

Keep in mind costs to development from scratch versus costs to purchasing commercial off the shelf software. Even if the software doesn't do everything the way you may like, almost all of them provide application programming interface sets to allow for deeper modifications to the core systems and integration to other systems.

And for future support of the system, determine your risks. Is the software company viable for the long term? If they are purchased or go under, how would you support your CM system? If you develop in-house, is there enough documentation for future support? Was it built using standards and methods understandable by future developers and maintenance personnel?

Development from scratch needs to be carefully reviewed, unless there is some compelling reason to do so, this may put you at the most risk. Although a commercial off the shelf software implementation may be the way to go, make sure it is as configurable as you need it to be and that it aligns itself with your developers' skill sets.

What are the issues I need to think about if I'm transforming the business?

What are we talking about here? Well, almost always, and no matter what form of CM you are considering, there is an impact to your employees, your partners, and your customers. This needs to be considered and planned very carefully. More than likely, you already have some form of method in communicating and sharing information amongst interested parties. Now you are thinking about introducing a CM solution to replace or augment that communications and sharing.

Whatever CM you decide on, you need to work with your implementation team in assuring the rollout doesn't 'surprise' anyone, especially you. There are methods to plan your CM project to include appropriate and timely communications (internal and external) about the coming changes and their benefits and training plans.

It is never too early to start the internal transformation process, get an early understanding where your resistance might come from and plan a strategy for it, look for internal champions who will rally the troops to this new great thing, and explain the benefits to the organization and to the individual (i.e. what's in it for me?)

How will I measure success and value?

After you've received commitment to do the project, you've received funding, selected a project, and implemented the project there's still more to do. You have to be able to demonstrate how the CM solution has returned or will return the investment.

Start from square one "What am I trying to do with CM?" Even though you may not have thought in terms of ROI then but it's there, somewhere in your head. You must have been thinking of something that triggered your interest in CM. Think it out.

Maybe you thought about saving costs, e.g., space, materials, printer/mail/fax costs, employee productivity, etc. Maybe you thought about the ability to increase sales by giving customers another way to interact with you to buy your products and services and save costs, i.e., e-business and e-commerce.

There are many ways to measure success and your ROI. Think about how life is today and how what you are looking for CM to do for you in terms of hard and soft savings compared to the initial CM investment and recurring costs, e.g., maintenance. And just as significant, what it could mean in developing new business.

Summary

No matter which CM direction you may choose, if planned well, you can be almost guaranteed you will be better off with it than without it. Put an internal team together; make sure you have representation from all groups and departments that would be impacted. The thought here is to be clear on what your CM goals are, do your research, understand your current and future IT environment, decide whether you want to build something yourself or purchase, appreciate the impact on your organization, customers, and partners, and most importantly, know how you will measure the success of your CM implementation.

About The Author : Thomas Lites is a project manager and consultant with the Systems Consulting Group of Crowe Chizek. His 20-year IT career has been focused on content management and e-business. He is a Certified e-business Solution Advisor and can be reached at tlites@crowechizek.com.

Copyright 2002 Jupitermedia Corporation, All Rights Reserved.