



Document Control versus Document Management

There seems to be confusion between the term “document control” and the commonly used term “document management”. In fact, in many instances it appears that document management has become the generic term for anything that involves the handling of documents whether they are of a transient nature or are core to an organisation’s operations.

We will therefore attempt to clear up this area of confusion and to try to explain the differences between the two disciplines.

Document Management as a generic term means a system where documents can be securely stored, indexed and searched, accessed, version controlled, archived or deleted. Document Management can also create a collaborative environment permitting multiple users to access and modify documents and, at the front end, to scan hardcopy documents and convert them into a digitised format where they can then be managed electronically.

Document Management systems have grown enormously in complexity over the years. At its beginning they involved the simple scanning of documents into microfiche for storage and then indexing for quick retrieval to their current position of umbrella status where they cover the electronic management of any type of information with the blurring of the lines between itself, Content Management (web pages) and Knowledge Management (unstructured data).

In its position as a generic term and umbrella status it could be said that document management involves the management of a high volume of documents that will largely include documents of a short lived nature. These can include emails, items of correspondence, contractual documents and scanned letters; which in general will have a single version existence.

Document Control on the other hand is more prescriptive in nature and involves the management (or control) of documents that are more essential to an organisation’s operations.

They are documents that have been put together for a specific use in mind, released for well thought out reasons and have gone through a recorded approval process to ensure relevance and accuracy. When the documents need to be modified to reflect changes in operations, the required changes and their reasons are identified, the person making the changes and the date of those changes are recorded and, importantly, the modified versions are separated from prior versions to prevent confusion.

It is important that access to the documents is regulated so that only the appropriate documents and their latest versions are available to the people who require them. In addition, out of date documents must be archived for historical purposes.

An audit trail of the events in the life of a document and its prior versions is a useful tool in being able to quickly access information about a document and should be included as a standard in a Document Control system.

Clearly these documents have many lives to reflect the normal changes that occur in an organisation and its operations with each life representing a change however slight from the previous one. The prior lives of the document, or versions, need to be accessible so that not only the progression of the document can be followed but also so that a prior version if appropriate can either be resurrected as the current latest version or be used as the template to build the latest version.

Given the similarity of both disciplines and the sameness of the terminologies it is easy to understand why confusion has reigned and why the term document management is used as the generic term for the electronic handling of documents. But as a rule of thumb it is fair to say that a Document Control system could do the role of Document Management in an environment where the amount of transient documents is not too great; while care has to be taken to ensure that a Document Management system has the prescriptive elements in place, or able to be activated, to effectively act as a Document Control system.

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