THE FORMS MANAGEMENT FUNCTION

INFORMATIONAL ARTICLE

The Forms Management Function

There are an estimated 15-20 thousand forms management professionals in the U.S. and Canada. Most of them work for large corporations, federal government agencies, or in state and provincial governments. Many work in regulated or process-intensive organizations such as insurance, healthcare, financial, and government. Some work in printing and consulting capacities. However, the profession is highly fragmented, with no standard structure or definitions.

We trace the roots of forms management all the way back to the beginning of the industrial revolution. Over the years, forms management remained a fragmented, low-profile profession with little training or recognition.

Forms management began to emerge as a recognized profession in the 1880s when the Cockrell Committee was established by the US Congress to examine federal government business processes with the goal of improving efficiency. In a 1935-37 study, the US National Archives found widespread inefficiencies in government. After the rapid growth of government during World War II, the first Hoover Commission was established, and it made many recommendations for process improvements. However, it wasn't until the second Hoover Commission on Paperwork Simplification completed its report in 1953 that forms management was formally defined as a profession. Since that time, forms management has evolved into a complex and growing business requirement.

During the 1990s, many business leaders believed that electronic forms would automate everything, and that forms management would not be a core competency. Accordingly, forms management departments were downsized, outsourced, or transferred to the Information Technology department. The term "forms" became almost an outcast, and everything was re-defined as "documents" and forms management was considered a part of document management.

Of course, that did not work. Now, many organizations are re-establishing forms management functions and separating them from document management and records management. In 2009, the Canadian General Standards Board (CGSB) published the first Forms Management standard, which defines the function and provides direction and guidelines for the profession. In 2011, the Business Forms Management Association (BFMA) partnered with Essociates Group to offer comprehensive training in a year-long online course titled "Best Practices in Forms Management".

Documents, Forms, and Records:

First, we need to define our terms. The New York Office for Technology defines a **Document** as a "container of information". The container can be in any format and on any media (including mobile devices). It is the container that provides context and meaning in a user environment.

A **Form** is a specialized document that contains fields for the capture and/or display of variable data. It is the presence of these fields that distinguish forms from other types of documents. The Canadian standard defines a form as "a structured template or tool, irrespective of media in which it appears, used to capture, compile, transmit, communicate and record specific business information."

Records are instances of documents (including completed forms) that are used in a specific transaction or context.

Document management, as a profession, generally involves image or data capture of completed records and the management of those records in a business workflow or process.

Records management, as a profession, generally involves establishing retention requirements and managing those requirements.

Forms management, as a profession, includes workflow and process analysis, design analysis, container design and mapping (adding fields, field properties, and scripting), usability testing, deployment management, forms analysis, regulatory, legal, and policy reviews, and overall forms control.

We generally define four distinct **Form Types**:

- **pForms (physical substrate forms).** Includes paper, pressure-sensitive labels, envelopes, tags, checks, etc.
- **eForms (electronic forms).** Digital forms used in a proprietary environment.
- **iForms (internet or intranet).** Digital forms used within a browser.
- **vForms (virtual forms).** Forms that exist as code and display only when that code is executed.

Each of these form types has specific design and deployment requirements and design techniques. All of them contain the **Four Elements** of a form:

- **Intent.** The justification for the existence of the form, including the business systems it supports, business rules to be implemented in the form container, and requirements for process efficiency.
- **Container.** The physical layout of the form, including form fields and form intelligence.
- **Data.** The requirements of the data to be captured and displayed, including sources and uses of the data.
- **Image.** Usability and user interaction with the form, accessibility, and marketing/organization message.

Forms development activities, like most (if not all) business functions, follow a defined workflow, with multiple business processes. The forms development workflow includes the following processes:

- Workflow analysis and charting
- Process analysis and charting
- Forms analysis
- Design analysis
- Container design and proofing
- Container mapping and alpha testing
- User and usability testing
- Deployment planning and management
- Metrics measurement and management reporting
- Forms Control

Developing the “Best Practices Forms Management Program”:

Achieving the Best Practices Forms Management program is not easy. In most organizations, the forms management function is historically understaffed, under-trained, and under-appreciated. The function is generally viewed as a cost center and, at best, a necessary but non-strategic function. In times of business stress, the function is usually one of the first areas to be downsized and outsourced. Predictability, that almost always results in less efficiency and higher costs. People still need forms to do their jobs. With no

support, they are forced to design and develop their own forms. Without training, and without the proper tools, the resulting forms often fail to perform efficiently and effectively, and cost more to produce! The problem is compounded by increased risk – marketing risk, regulatory risk, and increased errors in data capture and display.

Generally, the first thing we at Essociates Group do when engaged to help organizations develop a Best Practices Forms Management program is conduct a Current State Analysis. This includes identifying all existing forms development activities, documenting their processes, calculating current costs, and examining current results. This is almost always a real eye-opening experience!

The next step is to compare the current state to Best Practice principles and prepare a Gap Analysis. These gaps are prioritized based on cost and expected impact. From this analysis, a Recommendations Report is prepared, including a Return-on-Investment calculation for each recommendation.

The Recommendations Report generally follows a prescribed approach but also includes specific gaps that have been identified. Our approach includes:

- Strategy
- Structure
- Staffing
- Policies, Processes and Procedures
- Forms Technologies
- Forms Control
- Metrics and Management Reporting

It all begins with strategy. If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there. Is this to be an enterprise-wide program? What level of senior management support will you have? Does forms management include workflow and process management? What is your definition of a "form" and what will be included in the program? How will you address privacy, security, and access issues? What is Forms Management's Mission, Vision, and Objectives?

Needless to say, senior management support is critical. To get this support, a comprehensive business plan is developed, with cooperation and support from critical departments, and presented to management. Senior management issues a Forms Policy statement, which provides the overall authority for the rest of the strategy development.

Once a strategy is in place, the next step is structure. This includes establishing where the forms management department will report, establishing a forms committee, and establishing a system of forms coordinators and form owners.

After structure comes staffing. This includes both determining the specific positions needed as well as staffing levels required. The following positions (skills) are required:

- Manager, Forms Management
- Business Analyst
- Forms Analyst
- Forms Designer
- Forms Technician
- Systems Coordinator

In larger departments, senior positions can be established to work on more strategic and complex projects.

Policies, processes, and procedures include forms Project Request processing and tracking, developing, and maintaining a Program Manual and Style Guide, and a variety of procedures for implementing the forms development workflow.

Forms technology that will be utilized needs to be carefully selected after a strategy has been established. Too often, form management is simply told what technology to use based on what the organization may have available. Generally, such software is not ideal for forms development and is not the best practice. The software to be employed should be specific to forms development and deployment. What may be perceived as less work and support requirement for an Information Technology problem usually means more work and less efficiency in forms management.

Forms-related technology may include:

- Forms database
- Forms design software
- Forms mapping software
- Forms deployment (catalog or portal) software
- Forms intranet page
- Process mapping software
- Project management software
- HTML knowledge
- JavaScript or other scripting knowledge
- Understanding of XML

The forms control function provides most of the behind-the-scenes support and can include the following:

- Form number assignment
- Form title assignment
- Form file maintenance
- Project tracking
- Forms database data entry
- Management of routine projects
- Beta testing support
- Program Manual and Style Guide maintenance
- Running queries and preparing reports
- Project close-out
- Obsolescence management

Metrics tracking is a complex function. Starting with the basic premise that “you cannot manage that which you do not measure”, the forms database must provide a place to store a lot of data about each form and each form project. Such data is compiled regularly into the kinds of information required by each level of management. In a best practices program, we recommend that reporting be done as follows:

- **Senior Management.** Annually. Focused on net contribution to the organization and strategic projects completed.
- **Mid-Management.** Quarterly. Focused on resource utilization, staffing levels, and service levels
- **First Level.** Monthly. Focused on workload, number of projects active by type, and number of projects completed.

Clearly, forms management is a complex function that has the potential to positively impact process efficiency, reduce overall costs, improve profitability, or contribute to the agency mission, and help attain high customer service levels.

All organizations have a forms management function, whether or not it is formalized. Forms don't just appear, become available, and work well. Absent a formal development function, the forms development process is diffused throughout the organization and efficiency surely suffers as costs rise.