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Implementing a Correspondence Management Tool for your Projects: what System do you Really Need?

The ability to manage, track and archive the correspondence issued and received throughout a large, complex and long project can make a difference in the outcome and beyond, in case of claims. Dedicated tools (in-house customization or off-the-shelf products) and relevant processes are required. But before being able to select and implement the right solution, expectations need to be clarified, and priorities addressed. The requirements for a project correspondence management tool shall be agreed and carefully documented to allow the selection of the solution best adapted to one's business. This White Paper explains the main issues that need to be considered.

Guiding Principles

Project personnel will agree that correspondence received and issued throughout project life shall be carefully managed, in a way that it can be easily tracked, followed-up, and retrievable, with relevant level of security and confidentiality.

Setting the common grounds for requirements and principles leading the implementation shall be the priority when starting to define specifications for a correspondence management system. The guiding principles will focus on high level expectations such as:

- Ensure official project correspondence is consistently captured and archived

- Ensure correspondence status is identified and tracked (e.g. what was sent for information/for action, what are the action owners and actions pending…)

- Ensure correspondence can be searched and retrieved easily (even over several years)

- Ensure system is able to secure access to sensitive or confidential correspondence items

- Ensure each correspondence can be identified with unique number / company / sender / recipient / date / status

Must have

Tracking, search and reporting features are particularly important and need to be considered in priority when evaluating solutions:

1 - We are talking about correspondence tracking: therefore ensure the system can have a workflow to distribute the correspondence, for information or for action, and follow-up. If there is an action associated to the correspondence, action owner needs to be identified, and the workflow shall track the outcome and close-out of the action.

2 – Reporting is a critical aspect of this tracking: the tool shall enable easy reporting on the status of correspondence and actions, such as: which actions are open and late? Which letters need to be replied by end of the week?

3 – Search: the purpose of such system is to enable easy retrieval of required information, therefore search options

is a critical feature. Selected solution shall offer advanced search and filtering based on selected properties, as well as full text search in the correspondence items and attachments.

This being agreed, expectations with regards to what a correspondence management tool should do will vary in a certain extent, and some work needs to be done beforehand to define what we are really talking about.

> **What do you mean by « Correspondence » when it comes to managing project correspondence?**

Scope

About "Correspondence"

The question always arises when we start discussing around correspondence tracking tool: What do we really mean by correspondence? What type of "correspondence item" do we expect a system to manage? Indeed a letter may be sent or received by post mail. But in many cases it will be sent/received as an attachment in an email. Alternatively, a client may require letters to be dropped into an e-room or document management system. So what if your correspondence tool is only an email tracking tool? And in the case of sending letters in emails, what is your "correspondence": the email, the attachment, both? If you issue a letter via email, what shall be numbered: the letter, the email, both? Will you have supporting documents with this letter? Etc… You may want to list down your various "correspondence" scenarios. You'll have to define which "documents" are usually treated as correspondence, and what are the flows that need to be catered for.

Document Management vs. Transmission?

Once you have clarified scenarios, identify what most common cases need to be addressed in priority: focusing on critical points will give a better picture of the tool you need.

You can have a system that will only manage your transmission: whatever is transmitted, the system will only manage the creation, numbering and sending of an email, regardless of its content (and attachments). In that case, you need to ensure you can retrieve easily documents that need to be sent in attachments. Alternatively, a system can help you prepare certain types of documents that will be transmitted, a letter for instance: in that case, you may want the system to handle templates, letter preparation, review and approval, possibly signature, before it can be sent and tracked. This would require more sophistication, as well as more discussion with regards to roles,

responsibilities, processes and workflows to be implemented. This will impact the numbering too.

Integration

A correspondence tracking tool, unless you choose a very basic and manual solution, most likely will have to integrate with other systems.

Most common integration will be with your email system. The IT infrastructure and policies in place will have an impact there, and you need to ensure relevant IT personnel is involved in the discussions at early stage to avoid any bad surprises (Add-ons or plug-in may need to be installed on users' computers, systems compatibilities need to be validated, etc…). Most correspondence tracking tool can automatically archive emails received to a dedicated email address, and use basic metadata for preliminary filing.

Your company may already have a centralized directory, or dedicated project directories: you may want the correspondence tool to be able to retrieve/use this information; or alternatively, if nothing is in place, you may need to ensure that the system can handle a directory.

Last but not least, if you manage your documents in a dedicated system, ensure the correspondence tool allow you to retrieve the documents that need to be sent. For instance, if you are using the tool to create and send emails, ensure that you can retrieve and attach files located in your document management system.

> **The more the system can do and the more automated it is, the more complex it will be to implement and roll-out. So keep the right balance and focus on YOUR business priorities.**

Some companies might also want their correspondence tracking system to integrate with your document control system for transmission of technical deliverables.

Complication

In the end, it is all about how sophisticated – and therefore complicated (to implement and to use) – you want your system to be, and find the right balance between efficiency and complication:

1) Basic tool: mostly manual handling allowing basic electronic filing, with properties added, simple status tracking and reporting, search options and retrievable items

2) Semi-integrated tool: average solution, semi-integrated and semi-automated - for instance the tool may integrate with your email system to automatically receive and track emails, but may not help you in preparing and dispatching correspondence.

3) Sophisticated: fully automated and integrated to business and company tools, catering for the whole correspondence management process.

What needs to be stated in the specifications document

As a minimum, the specifications for a correspondence management system shall include the following information:

1. Context: why the company is willing to implement such tool, what are the existing tools in place, what are the current challenges and pain points, what business activities and locations are involved
2. High level requirements.
3. Technical information and pre-requisites (infrastructure available, volume benchmarking…)
4. Description of the various flows (correspondence to/from Client; to/from Third Parties; internal correspondence, etc…)
5. Minimum reporting expectations
6. Search engine expectations
7. Roles and responsibilities (who is in charge of doing what)
8. Priorities: differentiate the *must have* from the *nice to have* (that can be kept for later enhancements).
9. Flexibility: identify which parameters need to remain configurable from a project to another (ideally, limit the amount of hardcoded information).

Conclusion

Project Value Delivery has implemented a number of Correspondence tracking tools for regional and global project-driven businesses and can provide benchmarks and a framework for such system's implementation or enhancement. Contact us to benefit from our experience!