

Imaging Records – Where Do You Start?

Imaging records may seem easy on the surface, but it requires a lot of upfront planning and significant time investment to be successful. This can feel overwhelming, but there are several activities your agency can do to prepare for this new approach to records.

1. **Understand why you want to do imaging.** Are you imaging documents to save physical filing space? Do you want to automate your processes and imaged records are a part of that plan? Are you trying to make it easier to find your documents quickly? Are you trying to plan ahead ‘because everyone will be doing imaging soon’? Knowing why you are imaging and where you want to end up will help you anticipate your time investment, costs and the level of outside expertise you may need to engage.
2. **Do assessments.** This will help you understand and communicate what you need your imaging tools to do for you.
 - a. What kind of documents do we have? (Make a list of document types and ask your records officer to help you match them up to your retention schedules)
 - b. How many documents do we have? (Hundreds? Thousands? Hundreds of thousands?)
 - c. How do we use them?
 - d. How do we file them? (Personnel number? Last Name, First Initial? Hire Date?)
 - e. How often do we retrieve them?
 - f. How long do we need to keep them?
3. **You don’t have to image everything.** Imaging can be expensive and scanning everything is not always reasonable. Many groups take a mixed approach to choosing what to scan and how.
 - a. It is typical **for new or current records** to be scanned into individual documents. This makes it much faster to go directly to the document you are looking for.
 - b. **Documents that are part of an automated process** (like application processing) are often imaged, even if they have a short retention period, due to the business need/benefit to have them available electronically.
 - c. **Paper documents that have a short retention period and are rarely accessed** - It is common practice to store these paper records instead of image them, as to the costs of imaging usually exceeds the business benefit of having them available electronically.
 - d. **Paper documents that have a long retention period and are rarely accessed** – It is common to scan these records when there is a physical space cost savings or a security benefit. However, the labor required to prepare and image the individual documents can get expensive. In these cases, it is a common practice to scan these records into large, multi-document files. Keep in mind that it is very time consuming to locate a specific document in one of these records, so this approach is reserved for rarely accessed historical files.
4. **Understand that the way you look for a document in imaging is not the same as the way you look them up in a paper file.** Many times our first impulse is to scan an entire file as a single document because that is how we interact with paper file folders.

This approach is not a best practice in imaging. Though it may be fast to flip through pages in a paper file, it is slow and time consuming to flip through images in a 200 page PDF or TIFF file, especially if your document is on page 150 and you just need to check a signature. In imaging, it

is much faster to split the file into individual documents and use a search to go directly to the 2-page document you are looking for.

5. **Standardize your processes.** Imaging goes much easier if the process and naming is always the same. This is one of those areas where ‘each one is different’ makes things a lot harder.
6. **Stick to your plan.** Imaging is like any major change in business, you have to keep following your plan or you won’t reach your desired outcome. This means change management and staff training.
7. **Ask for help.** You have several resources for help in this area. Talk to a variety of sources for help, suggestions, lessons learned and best practices. The Secretary of State’s Archiving office, other agencies that have implemented imaging, electronic records management consultants and AIIM.org (an organization that focuses on electronic records management best practices and approaches) all have hard earned experience in this area and can help you achieve your goals without going through the painful parts of the learning process.

Remember, you will put a lot of time into your imaging program, so it’s just a matter of when. You either spend the time up front planning out a successful system, or you spend the time later working around the unexpected issues that were missed in the beginning.