

Whitepaper

How digital archiving can help your business

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1. About RetSoft

RetSoft is a Dutch software development company (www.retsoft.com) which specialises in digital archiving solutions. Apart from that we see it as a challenge to apply our knowledge and expertise to provide solutions for more complex archiving situations for large corporate users like TNT Post Parcel Service.

Our software is not designed for any specific line of business so it is extremely versatile in which industry it can be deployed. A logical result of this has been worldwide interest in our solutions and this has culminated in the formation of a number of partnerships with international resellers.

2. What is digital archiving?

History

I assume you are familiar with the concept of archiving. This can be defined as storing data in records or files in an organised and systematic manner. Digital archiving takes this into the information technology era and transforms this process into a more efficient business tool.

Why do we archive documents? The answer to this question is simple as it allows us to keep important data safe for future reference. In the distant past the only option for such information to be saved for posterity was to write it down on a piece of paper or carve it into stone. Paper perishes over time and stone erodes if exposed to the weather over an extended period of time. Until the invention of computers became a fact there was no other method available. Computers allowed humanity to store data electronically and therefore added a new dimension to how information could be distributed.

Information Technology era

A modern day computer coupled with a scanner can digitalise documents and store them in electronic form in its hard drive. This way you have created a copy of your physical document on your computer which can be treated like any other file on your system. You can move it, print it, e-mail it or delete it if you no longer require it. Is this digital archiving though? Not yet, as although the document has been transformed into an electronic file it merely sits in a location somewhere on your computer. There is no system keeping track of it and your file is vulnerable to be lost or forgotten if not properly looked after. One single file won't be much of a problem but business owners and professionals alike typically have more documents to process and keep track of. You can build your own digital archive by placing the scanned files into designated folders and sub-folders so you know exactly where to look for them if you need to check a contract, an invoice or product information. This is inexpensive but not very practical over time when dealing with a growing number of documents.

Digital Archiving Software

Digital archiving software is available nowadays to automate the archiving process. This ranges from very simple indexing applications which enable you to create some form of structure or index in your list of documents to more powerful applications

which offer a full fledged archive. Depending on your budget and requirements you can opt for the most suitable system.

Higher end systems make use of database technology which ranges from the modest MS Access database to the extremely powerful SQL Server, MySQL or Oracle databases. A database essentially is a tool to organise your data. Think of a white sheet of paper you can write words, numbers and letters on in any order and in any position. It won't make sense unless it is grouped together, structured and organised into categories. A database does that for you.

The big difference between storing individual files on your hard drive and opting to store them in a database is that you can work in a far more efficient manner since you can index your files, store them in one easy to backup database file and above all retrieve the desired information at a much faster rate. Additionally the security issue is relevant as a database can be password protected and is not composed of scattered files on your hard drive. The chance your files will be infected, corrupted or deleted by accident is reduced to a minimum this way and hackers can't gain access to them automatically in the event your system has been hijacked.

Digital archiving versus workflow

Digital archiving and workflow are two different things although they are closely connected to each other. Storing and retrieving files is the essence of digital archiving and generally is more than enough for 90% of the business community. However some (large) businesses require a system which allows for administration of different versions of documents, approval by a number of people and automatic copies to be sent to various staff members in the organisation. These systems usually are designed for larger companies or companies with a specialist area of business. Digital archiving is the last stage of workflow in essence and there are several modular software packages available which offer you a choice to buy what you need. Also a number of companies integrate their systems with financial software or CRM and there are even connections between digital archiving and workflow systems from different vendors.

3. How can it help my business?

Increase your efficiency

As a business owner or professional you are facing a day to day challenge in your work as it is. Reach your sales targets, determine your strategy, work on your marketing and manage your associates. The last thing you want to do is waste a lot of your valuable time on administrative processes, of which archiving is probably the most tedious one. The filing itself isn't the worst part of it but to do it according to a fixed system which enables you to pull up the required documents at will later on is a chore. One error and you can lose a file in the masses just because you put it under X instead of Y.

A professional digital archiving solution will allow you to scan and save your files into a database. You can give your document a name, add keywords and in more complex systems even create an intricate set of rules and instructions to process documents in a workflow sequence. The database will enable you to retrieve the document you need by means of a query in which you can enter keywords. Advanced digital archiving systems usually offer OCR (text recognition) technology to aid this process. This means that a scanned document will be searched in its entirety by the software for the keywords you entered.

Digital archiving saves you a lot of time by automating administrative processes. You can make your work far more efficient and focus more time on what's really important.

Decrease costs

If you could count the time you and your associates spend on finding information in invoices, contracts and other documents then you would probably be amazed. This translates into the price of labour and your fixed expenses. Every hour spent on a task which could be done in 10 minutes with the right system is a waste. Not only of the time but also of the money. Hourly wages and fixed expenses form the overheads of your business and the more time spent on supporting tasks the less time you can spend on bringing home the proverbial bacon. In addition the work of 6 people in accounting who spend a lot of time arranging invoices and receipts could be reduced to the work of 2 with a proper system.

Boost your revenues and profits

Imagine a salesperson spending several hours of his time trying to find product information for a prospect, a copy of that Purchase order he misplaced or correspondence from a prospect in which he agreed to buy at a certain price. Every minute he spends on not selling his company's products or services means a loss as not only loses the salesperson valuable time but also the required focus to be successful at his core activity: sales. Count to that the fact that the response time to prospects and existing customers is much shorter so the image perceived of the salesperson is much more favourable. Having all the information at your fingertips means you'll never get caught off guard and therefore can respond in a decisive manner to questions from prospects at all times. No fumbling or hesitation and no lag in getting back to people because you need to search for information. Increasing your effectiveness in sales this way will eventually lead to more sales being closed and therefore revenues and profits increasing as a logical result.

In conclusion

Digital archiving will turn your organisation into a highly effective system. Apart from the afore mentioned benefits such as efficiency, cost reduction and revenue/profit increase the automation of archiving and information retrieval also leads to a boost in motivation. Repetitive and time consuming tasks are nobody's favourite activity and it can be rather unsettling over an extended period of time. Motivation partly comes from gratification you receive by doing your work well and having a feeling you are a master of your craft who is in total control of what he does. The benefits of office automation in general transcend beyond just the visible aspects as motivated staff is productive staff.

4. What do you need?

Only you decide what you need

Sales people often don't think from the perspective of their customers. Pushy sales tactics and the desire to rake in the highest commission on that spanking new top of the line system they've just successfully advised you to buy make us all wary of buying new technology. You know you need to do something about your current situation but you are reluctant to put your fate in the hands of a guy with "I have to make this sale to meet my quota today" written all over his forehead.

Of course no expert is fully impartial as we live in a commercial world but a good salesperson will not advise you to buy more than you need. Take in advice from multiple sources and ask what your fellow entrepreneurs are using prior to requesting offers and quotes from vendors. This white paper was designed to accomplish just that and I hope it answers most of your questions on what digital archiving is and how it can help your business. Educate yourself on where you can make your life easier and your business prosper and pick a solution which enables you to accomplish this.

What is the best solution for you?

There are many solutions available but not all will be suitable for your business or even fall within your budget. If you are an independent lawyer you'll have different requirements than a law firm with 50 lawyers and a host of support staff. Even though it's the same line of business you will have a difference in the quantity of documents, importance of access restrictions and even a difference depending on which area of the law you specialise in. A freight forwarding company in turn may have completely different requirements altogether and so forth.

Important criteria for you to consider when choosing your solution:

1. How many documents do you intend to archive in a year? Think about all the invoices, receipts, contracts, orders and other paperwork you save for future use.
2. Is mere archiving/retrieval sufficient or do your documents follow a certain administrative procedure which could be carried out by a workflow system? What do you want the system to do exactly?
3. How many people will use the system in your company? And how many in 1 or 2 years time?
4. Do you require a link with financial software, CRM or other software?
5. What is your budget for a solution like this? Set one as otherwise you are in danger of paying too much just for the sake of having it.
6. What is the current state of your available hardware? Is a new system compatible and will it stay that way in the future?
7. Are your staff able to easily work with the system you choose or are you prepared to send them on a training course if required?
8. What are the support/update costs for the software you select? Many vendors have a yearly maintenance fee they charge which has to be entered into your calculation when deciding on a system.

5. Example from the business world

How it helps real people

In the early years of our company's existence we were approached by the national postal service of the Netherlands. This company needed to automate their track & trace system and wanted to accomplish this by acquiring an additional system to archive the signatures of people who received packages. These were physical signatures the postman would collect on a form and which in turn would be handed in at the regional depot.

We adapted our existing system to fit their requirements and all forms were scanned into this system locally after which they were transmitted to a central server. The customer service of the company then could search the archive on name, address,

postcode and parcel tracking number to pull up the electronic version of the form with the signatures.

The speed with which the postal service could now operate greatly increased their efficiency which lead in turn to overall cost reductions and increased customer satisfaction due to the high service level.

This is a prime example of how digital archiving helped one of the largest companies in the Netherlands to improve their business. You don't have to own a multi-million dollar company though to make it viable for your business as a few basic professional solutions can be purchased for just a few hundred dollars already.



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