General Study 22 – Managing and Preserving Office Documents: Evidential Value and Best Practices

Rationale

The principles developed by the InterPARES Project define that electronic records have to be exact, authentic and authenticated to have and to maintain evidential value overtime, and also to be considered potential archives. These requirements make necessary the use of authentication systems, control over records access and use, protection against modification once records have been considered originals, and the guarantee of records preservation during the lifecycle of the series to which records belong. All of these requirements find their ideal framework in the use of electronic records management systems.

According to these requirements, electronic documents created with office tools and managed in a LAN environment hardly could be considered records or archives. Lack of centralized control of access procedures, or user freedom to decide about final form and destination of every document it creates, are reasons to seriously question the capacity to fulfill these requirements. But the possibility to use authentication systems like advanced electronic signatures over office documents show the paradox of these kinds of documents, created in a valid way by their original producers but which often lose immediately the possibility to be considered records or archives due to the conditions of their chain of custody. Electronic records in office systems have become one of the most pressing problems of electronic records management, and are a preservation issue, because of many unsolved issues, which many organizations prefer to ignore.

At present, in most Spanish organizations, this is the situation of office documents management:

Organizations store a massive amount of documents in corporate LANs without knowing clearly if they have value or not, and without knowing if it is possible to eliminate them. This problem concerns all kinds of organizations and documentation, and an important part of the whole information that these organizations manage. The problem has increased with recent Spanish laws about eAdministration and eBusiness, which make mandatory some of these requirements for many transactions that use, for the moment, only office solutions (i.e., promoting the use of e-mail in inter-administrative communications with legal value without solving their capture, storage and preservation issues).

When organizations consider electronic records management, they consider only large and complex electronic records management systems. Often, the existence of office documents is forgotten, or they are considered simply "out of the system." But many organizations cannot afford the cost of implementing an electronic records management system, or do

not have the organizational conditions that could allow them to implement, in the short-term, such a solution.

Many organizations have defined good practices for electronic records management in office systems, based mainly on the principle of fostering the discipline of the users through training programs. These practices are playing a very important role in changing organizational culture previous to the implementation of an electronic records management system. But often these initiatives do not have enough resources or technical support to be successful (i.e., using document templates, support tools or an specific configuration of office systems).

This situation is the impetus for this study. First, it is important for us to define a pattern that allows organizations to know what to do with the electronic records currently stored in corporative directories, and decide when and how to preserve or delete them. Second, it is necessary to define the steps to avoid in the future to repeat this situation, and the criteria to use to determine the admissibility of office documents as records and archives going forward. Finally, thinking especially on those organizations that cannot afford to implement an electronic records management system in the short-term, this study will explore the low-cost technological solutions, available today on the market, that could help such organisations manage office documents as records and archives with less effort and better results than is the current status quo.

Objectives

1. To evaluate and systematize, using the InterPARES Project's conceptual framework, the requirements and criteria needed to recognize office documents as records and archives.
2. To identify and describe a set of good practices to organize, appraise and preserve office documents in a LAN environment.
3. To locate, and in some cases to develop, technological solutions to make easier the application of good practices. These solutions have to be simple, low-cost and readily available.

Work plan

The project will be structured in two phases:

1. Definition of a pattern and a set of best practices for the management of office documents:

   a. Evaluation of the evidential and archival value of electronic documents in office systems, and definition of a pattern of admissibility as records and archives, in accordance with the conceptual basis of the InterPARES Project. The objective is to describe which office documents, and in which conditions, can be considered records and archives.

   b. Compilation and systematization of a set of recommendations for the organization, preservation and appraisal of electronic documents in office systems, with special emphasis on organizations with few resources that cannot afford the acquisition of a centralized electronic records management system.

   c. As a complement to the recommendations, development of procedural models for the application of these recommendations in specific environments, based on

the InterPARES 2 BDR and COP models, will be developed. The validity of these models will be checked in practical experiments with selected sets of office documents from several case studies.

2. Creation of a repository of technological solutions:

    a. Survey of existing software solutions that support the use of the models and patterns defined in phase 1, and compilation in a software repository.

    b. Development of tools and specific integrations to make easier the use of the models and patterns defined in phase 1, working especially with templates and user oriented solutions.

Schedule

The study will start at the end of 2009, depending on external financing support for phase 2. A more detailed action plan will be available during the last term of 2009.