

Five Questions From The Digital Mailroom

Compiled by Vicki Amendola, editor of ECM Connection

The digital mailroom concept has been around for quite some time. I'd venture to say that the concept surfaced almost simultaneously with the first utterances of the phrase "going paperless."

Well, guess what. We're nowhere near the paperless nirvana, and we're likewise no closer to a pervasive adoption of the digital mailroom outside of the enterprise. Coincidence? I think not. Perhaps it's because we lack a concrete definition of what a digital mailroom really is, how it should function, and consistent standards by which performance could be measured. Today, the concept of the digital mailroom remains ambiguous at best, with one of the most persistent misconceptions being that the digital mailroom is a one-size-fits-all solution.

Recently I had a conversation with Mark Messier, a product specialist from OPEX Corporation. Mark defined this brilliantly when he said, "The thing to understand is that this concept is not pie-in-the-sky. The technology is here, now. What is needed for an end user is to start the process by gathering as much information as they can." You can find many vendors out there, OPEX among them, that have years of cumulative experience, sound products, and consultative knowledge for you to tap into. Here are five of the questions I asked Mark.

Q: HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE THE CONCEPT OF THE DIGITAL MAILROOM IN TODAY'S BUSINESS PROCESS LANDSCAPE?

Messier: In simplest terms, the digital mailroom is a concept where all incoming, physical communication, both departmental and personal, is centralized in the mailroom, converted to digital form — most often by a document scanner — then routed electronically to appropriate parties throughout the organization based on established distribution rules, often as part of a document or content management system. A variation on the theme would be where receipt of the source/incoming material is documented and the recipient notified. They are then given a choice as to what final disposition they wish for the correspondence, whether it should be delivered electronically, physically, rerouted, discarded, and so on.

However, the point is that the concept of the digital mailroom is still evolving and will continue to evolve until it reaches a tipping point where consistent standards start to emerge. Until then, the only constants in the equation are the need to open and extract mail, image the paper that mail is printed on, and deliver those

images to recipients. What you use and how you use it depends on the specific vendors that you look at while doing your investigation and due diligence, as each will have their own flavor to offer.

Q: WHAT ARE THE BUSINESS NEEDS THAT A DIGITAL MAILROOM CAN ADDRESS, AND WHAT IS NEEDED TO ACHIEVE SUCCESS?

Messier: There are numerous advantages and benefits to the digital mailroom concept, some tangible and others not, yet no less important. Over the years we witnessed a period where distributed scanning became the buzzword du jour and commodity scanners and MFD's (multifunction devices) proliferated in seemingly every hallway and office. It didn't take long for businesses to realize that not everyone's core competency lies

in being a scanner operator. That has led to the ongoing consolidation [of document scanning operations] that coincides with the genesis of the digital mailroom as a viable business process. The most tangible benefit of the consolidation of scanning into the mailroom is a reduction of cost, as moving paper around is much more expensive, and exponentially riskier, than moving images. Additionally, other benefits can be realized such as economies of scale, an improved and verifiable chain of custody, significantly better compliance attainment, improved customer service, and faster response times; all from the adoption of a digital mailroom.

Q: DO YOU THINK THE DIGITAL MAILROOM SHOULD BE VIEWED AS A ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL SOLUTION?

Messier: This is the big question. Everyone talks about the digital mailroom as though it is a fixed, concrete thing — like a



Moderator:
Vicki Amendola,
editor,
ECM Connection



Guest:
Mark Messier,
product specialist,
OPEX Corporation

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washing machine. You get the big one or the small one, but in any case you know what it is and what it does, right out of the box. In the case of a washing machine, hook it up, plug it in, stick in some clothes and detergent, pick a cycle, and press go. Does this work the same way with a digital mailroom? Well ... not so much. The definition of the digital mailroom is really still a work in progress. It means different things to different people and to different organizations, depending on their own desires and expectations of it and what it promises to do for them. A better analogy might be that it is more like selecting a healthcare plan for your company, or perhaps a data management system. The pieces, parts, processes, and scale are determined collaboratively between customer and supplier, based on the specific needs, budget, and tolerance for change that each customer brings to the equation.

Q: WHAT CHALLENGES SHOULD USERS ANTICIPATE WHEN IMPLEMENTING A DIGITAL MAILROOM?

Messier: Resistance to change, realistic expectations, and the issue of privacy are some of the hurdles that can be expected. The first two are common, but the third deserves some specific mention.

One of the somewhat confounding issues to surface in discussions regarding the digital mailroom is the idea that mail addressed to an employee of a business and received at the business' address is typically considered the property of the

business and therefore there is no expectation of privacy for the content of the correspondence. The idea that a letter addressed to an employee may be opened by an entry-level mailroom clerk and then digitized and routed around the building by a piece of software can understandably make a Chairman, CEO, or CFO question the wisdom of the whole digital mailroom concept. Buy-in and exception handling, along with the relative impact to the overall productivity of the process, are therefore essential elements to a successful implementation and likewise represent a significant challenge.

Q: WHAT MAKES THE DIGITAL MAILROOM A REALISTIC VS. IDEALISTIC IDEA?

Messier: At its core, all the technological pieces are finally available to make the digital mailroom a reality. Most have been for some time. Mail opening and extracting equipment, such as that produced by OPEX, have been around for more than thirty years and are in use all over the world. Scanners have evolved from large, monolithic specialty devices that require enormous investment in programming and document design to use, into simpler, programmable, near commodities that are available to any business at almost any budget. Finally, with the latest advances in structured and unstructured document classification, and document or content management applications, the software needed to complete the distribution puzzle can also be easily put into place, bringing the true efficiency of the digital mailroom to fruition. ■