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A Digital Asset Management Philosophy

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Best DAM Practices: A Digital Asset Management Philosophy

Echoing David Diamond in his kick-off article for this series, although it is now possible to learn DAM on the job with software and new technologies, simply “managing a DAM doesn’t make one an information professional”. Those who are successful in DAM are embedded in the culture, aware of the values and trends, and able to digest and incorporate all that information into sound management of their own system. In other words, successful DAM implementation is not just reliant on the software or hardware used, but on developing a strong organizational philosophy on digital asset management.

The components of DAM best practices are in many ways philosophical. Taken together, this series, *Librarian Tips for DAM Managers*, presents a strong foundation for developing a DAM philosophy that will be effective for your institution. The information and advice comes from seasoned information professionals with their own philosophical approaches to DAM shaped by years of experience and contemplation. There is no one official guide or book on DAM management, there are many, and this is a good thing.

Perhaps the best practice is to consume multiple resources to develop a well-informed ideology for your DAM that is not pigeonholed into any one policy, standard, or solution. It is more important that your DAM fits with your organization and mission, rather than into an existing model. Not all approaches are the same, and not all advice is applicable, but there are several common philosophical themes that tie DAM best practices together.

“Librarians understand assets.”

In her article earlier in this series, Linda Rouse said it best: “Librarians understand assets”. Archiving and creating access to assets is part of every librarian’s philosophy. Hiring a librarian for your DAM project is wise, but preferably you want a librarian with cataloging and database experience, since not all librarians understand the intricacies involved in cataloging or user interfaces. As other articles in this series have addressed, metadata and controlled vocabularies are no quick venture. Cataloging a wide variety of assets is something librarians do well, as they are experienced in everything from evaluating and incorporating standards to updating existing schemas.

It is rare to find a librarian with strong IT experience, but experience with databases and applications management is also essential. Understanding how applications work, being able to configure your tools, and being able to communicate with the vendor are essential to keeping your DAM alive. Content housed in a DAM is not any more useful than information spread across hundreds of CD-Rs. Therefore, intellectual value needs to be added to the assets in the DAM, whether it is in the form of metadata and controlled vocabularies, or application and user interface customization. Librarians are well prepared to add this essential value needed to make your DAM really dynamic.

Further evidence that the philosophy within librarianship fits well with DAM can be found in one of the discipline standards. The [Association of College & Research Libraries](#) (ACRL), the professional organization for thousands of academic librarians, publishes the [Information Literacy Framework](#), a guideline for information literacy instruction at the university-level. This framework has been around for about fifteen years, with a few iterations, and this latest one perhaps the most progressive. Of note is Framework [Frame #3: Information has value](#). While this framework was designed for college students, the overarching concepts fit many industries and settings. Outside the library, DAM initiatives are almost always centered on the concept that a company’s digital assets have value that needs to be respected, preserved, and made accessible to the best of their abilities. That concept has been embedded in librarian philosophy for as long as there have been libraries, and further proves why you need a librarian to run your DAM.

What Do You Want To Do?

A common question librarians will ask patrons when a vague reference inquiry comes to their desk is, "What are you really looking for?" In librarianship, it is well documented that a patron's initial reference question is usually not their actual research question. To get to the real request, the librarian has to dig in and ask a lot of questions on what the patron is trying to research and what he or she is trying to do. Only after investigating a bit will the reference librarian get to the heart of the research inquiry. This step in the reference process is crucial to moving forward in the right direction.

It follows then, that before any RFP (Request for Proposal), before any software or hardware considerations, and before any full DAM Committee Meetings, the organization must ask themselves what do they want to do with digital asset management. Just as with the reference interview, this step is essential before anything else can happen. This is that big philosophical moment where you ask those deep questions – Who are we? What do we want to do? Where are we going? – before drilling down into specifics like investigating software packages or planning your metadata schema. Do you want to centralize all digital assets into one location in an effort to reduce duplications and redundancies? What assets will be included, or not included? Do you need to create a job-ticketing module or to integrate an existing one? Or do you even need ticketing? How will users in the company interact with the system, and will they all need to use it? Contemplate the how, what, and why, as well as functions and tools that make sense for your organization, and don't focus too much on what others are doing.

Too often DAM planning starts with a look at what is out there, and at what solutions other companies in your industry are using. Take a moment and forget what is physical and think in the abstract. Dream a little bit! What if you had a full computer lab with endless technology and skilled staff literally giving you the resources to build something homegrown and totally custom? What would this amazing system look like? What would it do, who would interact with it, and how? While maintaining strong vendor relations is critical for the health of your DAM, you should also have bigger vision for your DAM and be able to articulate that to your vendor.

Once these big picture questions begin to have answers, heavy documentation must follow. While this is a digital discipline, there is no greater value than having a physical governing document that explains the who, what, where, why, and how. A solid DAM governing document or policy is detailed and granular. It explains roles from administrators down to basic users; it defines asset types, metadata schemas, and naming conventions; and it should document all workflows. If a decision was made, if a process or workflow was defined or updated, it needs to be documented. Once this documentation is generated, treat it as a living document, and review and update it annually.

If You Build It (For Them), They Will Come

Spending the proper time planning an ideal DAM solution for your organization should naturally lead to employees using the system. Designing solutions with everyone and their workflows in mind should ease any issues that surround user adoption, and help you avoid comments like, "It doesn't do what I need it to", or "That isn't for my department". If planning was not successful, it's likely that user adoption won't be either. It is therefore critical that no matter the DAM project, every user's needs are considered in terms of how they will interact with the system.

Marketing and promoting your DAM initiatives is also a fundamental, but often overlooked step in successful implementation and user adoption. If there is a general lack of knowledge about DAM initiatives and happenings within your organization, that will work against gaining user buy-in. It is not uncommon to hear employees mention that they did not know there was a DAM solution, or didn't know what it could do. If the employees in the institution don't know what the initiatives are, or what the systems can do, or are unaware of an in-house base of knowledge, then it will be an uphill battle to educate and grow user adoption. As the DAM manager you literally need to sell the DAM. Just like a salesman, know your product inside and out, be aware of your users' philosophies and values, and find connections that show departments the increased value and benefits that await them.

Another common misstep in some DAM implementations is assuming that every employee will need or want to use it. A need should be articulated or defined, otherwise a department can stick to their old processes. The hidden message there is don't force it. Resourceful and successful DAM managers don't spend all of their time thinking up creative ways to get all departments into the DAM. Instead, they focus on thinking of creative solutions and finding connections to increase value.

User adoption and training are only part of the equation in terms of leading to a successful DAM project. Solicitation of user feedback is crucial for the growth and development of your DAM. After all, DAM managers are rarely the ones who are actively searching for and using assets within the DAM, so they need input from the people that utilize the system regularly. This is something libraries and librarians do well, since most libraries are obsessed with how patrons (users) access the library's resources. Most libraries have a rolling program for assessing how their patrons interact with library tools and information resources in the form of surveys, data gathering, and in-person interviews. The information collected drives updates, generates new features, helps to solve problems, and generally leads to the development of services and resources that are truly needed. DAM programs need frequent user trainings and workshops, but they also need channels for feedback and user study initiatives in order to properly develop.

Evolve

A final philosophical message is that DAM is a dynamic organism that needs to be nurtured, educated, and respected. Above all, DAM needs room to grow and evolve. DAM is rooted in technology, and as such, it is subject to becoming obsolete quickly. Solutions and workflows put in place today are at risk of starting to decline tomorrow. What this means, ideologically speaking, is that as you create solutions that work for your organization now, develop these strategies with an eye toward the future.

A good example are metadata schemas and standards. The development and implementation of a metadata schema can be a monumental task, as was written about in an earlier article in this series. However, the implementation of the schema is only one aspect of the larger metadata picture. The schema needs to be evaluated for effectiveness, controlled vocabularies need to be continually vetted, and new needs have to be adopted and anticipated. Treating your schema as a living entity will only benefit you in the long run.

The same effort applied to keeping your metadata processes up to date should be applied to all of your DAM initiatives. Again, this is not just about software and hardware updates, but rather it is about utilizing your DAM philosophy, exercising the values you documented in your DAM policy, and making sure you are meeting goals. If the goals become stale, those too may need to evolve. There is very little in DAM that is concrete, including an established and well developed DAM policy, so it is vital to be able to grow, adapt, and change your DAM philosophy.

About Adam N. Hess

From capture to arrangement to discovery, Adam N. Hess has managed or consulted on many types of digital collection projects, with the proven ability to develop sustainable solutions and workflows for varied constituencies. Currently, Adam is an Assistant Professor & Digital Resources Librarian at *Arcadia University* (Glenside, PA), where he manages the university's institutional repository, as well as liaisons to the departments of Art & Design, Theatre Arts, and Media & Communication. Adam also teaches First Year Seminars, University Seminars, and Studio Arts courses. Adam earned an MFA in Studio Arts (2008) and an MLIS (2010) from *Louisiana State University* (LSU), where he also taught art and worked in many roles for the LSU Library System. In 2011 Adam was named the *Samuel H. Kress Fellow in Art Librarianship* at *Yale University*. Before returning to academia in 2014, Adam was the Digital Asset Manager for the *Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum* in New York.