

Enterprise Search or Content Management?

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Over the years I've been part of many enterprise content management initiatives. I've seen each repository grow, usually isolated from the others. I've also seen countless unmanaged repositories, such as network drives, grow even faster. The result is often an ecosystem of different, disconnected enterprise knowledge assets. An emerging cross-vendor standard called content management interoperability services (CMIS) offers to connect some of those repository dots.

CMIS was proposed by leading enterprise content management (ECM) vendors in September 2008 and then handed over to OASIS for broader review and eventual release. It is now in technical committee, with its goal to use "Web services and Web 2.0 interfaces to enable information sharing across content management repositories from different vendors." Even if CMIS succeeds, it will take a long time before vendor products are released, and it will apply only to ECM repositories.

In the meantime, some organizations seem to be giving up about ever connecting their repositories. Instead, they are looking to enterprise search (ES) as a shortcut to their findability problems. A 2009 AIIM ECM survey noted, "The single ECM system concept is still alive in 35% of organizations, whereas ... 9% [stated] they will use Enterprise Search to solve this problem" of getting to information not using an ECM (*italics added for emphasis*).

Enterprise search to the findability rescue? This idea that you can install an enterprise search tool-or any enterprise application-and solve the findability problem is flawed. I believe Google's almost magical ability to find what we seek on the web has made findability inside the firewall look too easy. I consulted with three industry findability experts to get their take on enterprise search as an alternative to ECM systems. In summary, each expert says that ES has made great strides recently and that it provides real value. But does that mean you can give up on integrating your repositories and just search them all? No.

I spoke with Whit Andrews, Gartner VP, distinguished analyst, and author of Gartner's 2009 "Magic Quadrant for Information Access Technology" report (Gartner includes enterprise search as a part of "Information Access Technology"). I asked if you can really just buy the right ES and then find everything you want throughout the enterprise. Andrews said that with this strategy, you can get search that will be very effective, but it isn't the same as 100% success. Both ES and ECM systems require diligence and governance.

ECM systems don't work well without proper tagging and placing content in the proper folders. According to Andrews, "When enterprises are most successful is when they identify a specific business problem they need to solve and then establish the solution for that with a search platform for which they have established expertise." He also acknowledged that you cannot simply buy, install, and walk away from powerful ES systems. He even believes an alternative might be to buy two systems, a tactical 80% solution installed quickly while doing full life-cycle diligence in addition to a more comprehensive solution. I noted that many corporate customers think that when they've paid for an ECM license, they've covered all their costs, whereas I've seen full life-cycle ECM costs run 3-5 times the original license costs. I asked if there is a similar ratio with ES costs. He said that well-defined statements of work tend to consider full costs to be up to double those of license costs, although the cost for tactical solutions can be much less than that.

Leslie Owens, a Forrester Research analyst, is also skeptical about the likelihood of an ES quick fix, although she too is a strong proponent of targeted search applications. "If you think of one problem and you match it up with one search engine," says Owens, "it can be successful." She is less

sanguine about tactical search solutions such as the Google Appliance because of "connectors," which are the software bridges that connect search engines with content repositories. Google can't search many legacy systems. Building those connectors can cause ES initiatives to fail, and costs can run far beyond the purchase or licensing price. She points out, "You have to work with the vendor to create connectors, and that is expensive," leading to scaled-back enterprise search visions.

Finally, SchemaLogic's Carol Hert, a consultant and taxonomist with whom I've worked, points out, "Out-of-the-box search may get you part of the way to findability, but [it] generally works best when enhanced with supporting semantic information-such as synonym or antonym dictionaries." Otherwise, searches won't yield expected results.

So is it ECM or ES? The answer is both-and then some.