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Optimizing the Automated Governance Capabilities of Microsoft 365®

by John Mancini, MER Industry Analyst

MER Insights

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May 2022

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meet your MER expert panel

We convened a panel discussion of the survey results on March 21, 2022. The draft survey findings were used as a foundation for a conversation focused not just on the trends suggested by the data, but on what to do about them. To ensure confidentiality and candid perspectives, this discussion was conducted under a variation of "Chatham House" rules.

We thank these Information Governance leaders — our **MER Expert Panel** — for their commitment to share their expertise and time in order to improve the overall level of competence and knowledge within the industry.

Within the report, quotes made during the MER Expert panel discussion are shown inset and in bold.

The **Recommendations** section was completely generated by the MER Expert panel, and we are particularly grateful for this contribution.

about the author

John Mancini is MER's Industry Analyst and Evangelist (merconference.com). He is the President of Content Results, LLC (www.contentresults.net) and the Past President of AIIM. He is a well-known author, speaker, and advisor on digital transformation, information governance, and intelligent automation. He is the author of *Immigrant Secrets: The Search for My Grandparents*, a personal memoir and reflection on the future of records, archives, and governance. John is a frequent keynote speaker and author of more than 30 eBooks on a variety of topics. He can be found on Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook as jmancini77.

meet your MER expert panel

Mimi Dionne
Mimi plays a critical role in McKesson Corporation's implementation of Microsoft 365 (described as M365 in the rest of this report). Focus areas in records and information management implementations include research, strategy, project management, communications, quality, budget, and change management best practices.

Jennifer Ingram
Jennifer is the Director of Legal Operations and Information Governance at International Paper Company. She has over 30 years experience in legal operations, information governance, systems and project management. She has a Bachelor of Business Administration degree and is a certified green belt.

Shukra Kichambare
Shukra is a problem solver, thought leader, and Senior Manager for Information Governance at Cummins Inc. He is a Board member at the Association for Intelligent Information Management (AIIM), a Certified Records Manager (CRM), and possesses a Six Sigma Black Belt.

Debra Mestermaker
Debra is a seasoned IM professional and Certified Records Manager (CRM) with over 30 years of experience managing complex and diverse information assets, primarily in the energy sector. Currently employed by Shell Oil Products US, she leads a small team tasked with delivering information management projects, tools, process, and compliance for Shell's downstream businesses globally.

Caroline Walters
Caroline Walters, MA, MLS, CRM has served on boards and committees of the ICRM, NAGARA, and the ARMA Richmond Chapter. She leads the Records and Information Management team at the University of Virginia, supporting faculty and staff in compliant records management and eDiscovery collection and processing related to FOIA, investigations, and litigation.

Angela Watt
Angela is a Certified Information Professional (CIP) with 22 years of cross industry experience working in managing information assets for municipal government education and private industry. Angela is passionate about change management and identifying the gaps that exist between people, processes, and technology. She also has extensive experience designing, implementing, and training staff at all levels on information governance.

Donda L. Young
Donda has served the Information Governance industry as an end-user, vendor, and consultant over the last two decades. She is a staunch advocate for the IG community, supporting it through volunteerism, leadership, and mentoring. Donda is a Certified Information Professional through AIIM International and and a member of the AIIM Company of Fellows.

about the research

The results of the survey and the market commentary made in this report are independent of any bias from the vendor community. The data shared in this report is just a small sample of the overall data generated in preparation for each research report, and *distribution of the full set of findings is limited to the underwriters.*

The survey was taken using a web-based tool in March 2022. There were a total of 200 responses. Core demographics of the participants:

Geography

North America..... 73%

Europe..... 5%

Asia..... 2%

Africa..... 3%

Australia..... 6%

South America..... 11%

Number of Employees

1-100 employees..... 15%

101-1000..... 38%

1001-5000..... 28%

Over 5000..... 19%

Organizational Role

IT..... 35%

Records or content management..... 28%

Legal..... 8%

Line of business..... 5%

Executive level..... 20%

Other (please specify)..... 4%

Type of organization

A private company..... 41%

A public company..... 2%

A government entity..... 22%

A non-profit organization 9%

Other (please specify)..... 2%

table of contents

The context for M365 automated governance and compliance | A rising tide of information chaos. **7**

The alignment of business, information governance, and M365 governance strategies is increasingly critical | But this alignment sorely lacking in most organizations. **11**

The pace of change in M365 is a significant challenge | Effective change management is more important than ever before. **15**

M365 automated governance and compliance adoption is still in the early stages | Most organizations have not caught up with capabilities of the platform. **18**

What role will the M365 governance platform play in your organization? **20**

Where is M365 automated governance headed? **22**

Expert Panel Recommendations **24**

About MER **26**

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The context for M365 automated governance and compliance | A rising tide of information chaos

We live in a time of exploding data and information flows, which are already overwhelming our ability to effectively manage — and the worst is still to come. As organizations struggle to transform into truly digital businesses and leverage the next wave of AI and machine learning technologies, most have an Achilles' Heel that threatens even the most well-intentioned digital transformation initiatives. *That vulnerability is out-of-control information.*

Honestly, we are facing a tsunami of information, and it just keeps getting bigger and bigger. We are in the digital age, but paper is still a very viable thing in many industries. Organizations are suffocating under the weight of paper, while simultaneously trying to embrace digital transformation. And they're not sure how to get there.

For 83%, rising levels of information chaos is a problem.

In a digital age, information is *the* core asset creating customer value and differentiating the offerings of one business from another. Information is also critical to how public sector organizations deliver value to constituents and taxpayers. This importance to both private sector and public sector organizations was clearly demonstrated during the pandemic, when organizations suddenly realized that unless they could rapidly digitize their business processes, they could no longer operate.

Developing an approach to address this vulnerability is the fundamental challenge of the digital era. On average, organizations believe *the volume of incoming information will grow four-fold in just the next 2-3 years,* and they are realizing that the old, manual, paper-based approaches to information management no longer work. Basing digital governance upon concepts like file folders alone will never be sufficient. Something needs to change. Without a strategy, organizations will slowly sink under the accumulated weight of their exponentially growing digital landfills.

It's not so much a rising tide of information chaos, it's more a rising AWARENESS of the tide that's already completely engulfed us.

On average, in 2-3 years incoming data flows expected to be 4.4 times current levels.

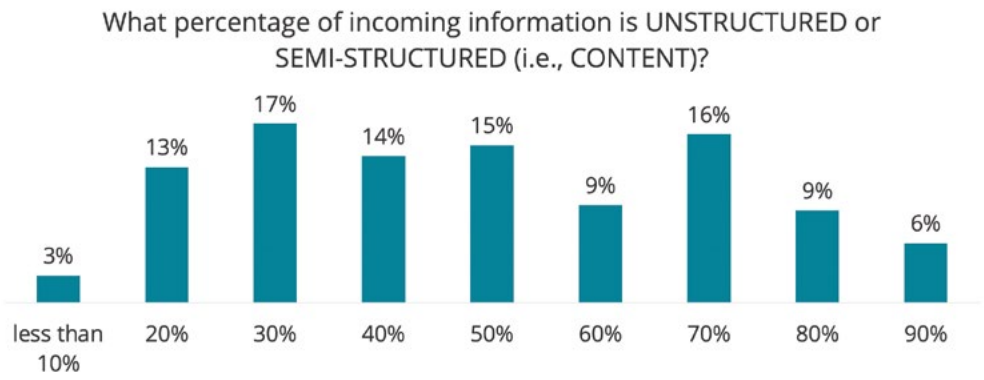
But the challenge is more complicated than just *more* data. The problem is that as technologies have spread to virtually every individual in an organization, the *type* of information that is arriving is changing as well. Some of the incoming information is still in the form of pure data, streaming off of web interactions, connected devices, and mission-critical line-of-business applications. Managing this structured data is a challenge, but one with which organizations have some familiarity. Organizations need to consider how lessons from the world of data can be applied to exploding volumes of *unstructured* and *semi-structured* information.

Managing *unstructured information* like email, text messages, Office application files, images, and videos, and *semi-structured information* like forms and invoices is still a problem for most organizations. *These types of information are just different from data.* They carry greater compliance and litigation risk. They are difficult to manage, search, and protect. They are unorganized and require large amounts of storage. Applying manual governance methodologies based on the file cabinet have proven a failure. The problem is a significant one — unstructured and semi-structured information represent 50-60% of the rising wave of information coming into and being created by our organizations.

"My senior executives are supportive, but they won't provide resources."

survey participant

On average, 50% of incoming information is CONTENT, requiring different management skills and strategies than DATA.



Large-scale mission critical processes that involve the collection, delivery, retrieval, governance, and overall management of documents were somewhat brought under control during the first wave of content-intensive process automation in the early 2000s, at least for large organizations. However, the transactional content management systems used to manage these processes touched relatively few knowledge workers.

But the consumerization of technology and its spread to the average knowledge worker changed everything. Suddenly, *everyone* — employees, partners, and suppliers — was creating unstructured information that needed to somehow be managed.

We've had 30 years of every employee creating hundreds of files every month. It's no longer enough to talk about retention and disposition. We must reframe the conversation.

The initial response to the democratization of technology was to try to manage this information in the same systems that were used to manage large volumes of transactional content. This was because the platform in which most collaborative information was created — the Office suite — was not robust enough to natively handle records management and governance. This approach has largely failed, because at scale it was too complex and too expensive. It also failed because it relied too much on convincing thousands of undisciplined knowledge workers to manually "do the right thing" with regards to the governance and records policies organizations put in place.

"Our leadership doesn't know what information governance is – it's a buzz word."

survey participant

Most individual end users believe they have some sort of structured and organized way to manage their information that meets their personal and team needs. The challenge — especially in large organizations — is that without a collaborative environment structured at the organizational level, the aggregation

of all of the well-intentioned choices by individual employees will be suboptimal at best, and counterproductive and risk-laden at worst. When employees store all types of content, including M365 content, on local workstations and laptops, it means that the organization is not able to see or manage the vast majority of corporate data.

The evolution of the on-premise Office platform into the cloud-based M365 platform is rapidly changing the way organizations think about the challenge of organizing and governing collaborative content. The problem of governing collaborative content suddenly looks differently given the significant out-of-the-box governance, compliance, records, and security capabilities that now exist in M365.

At a minimum, organizations want to manage M365 content in place and move unmanaged file shares into a more managed environment. In addition, some organizations are looking to retire legacy content management systems and migrate this content into M365 as well.

M365 is everywhere. It's ingrained and the standard for most organizations. Most are not governing it; it's the Wild West.

There are three major findings we will explore in this report:

1. The alignment of business, information governance, and M365 governance strategies is increasingly critical | But this alignment sorely lacking in most organizations.

2. The pace of change in M365 is a significant challenge | Effective change management is more important than ever before.

3. M365 automated governance and compliance adoption is still in the early stages | Most organizations have not caught up with capabilities of the platform.

"We could ignore IG before, but not once people started worked remotely."

survey participant

"Unfortunately, our C suite doesn't get it."

survey participant

The alignment of business, information governance, and M365 governance strategies is increasingly critical | But this alignment sorely lacking in most organizations.

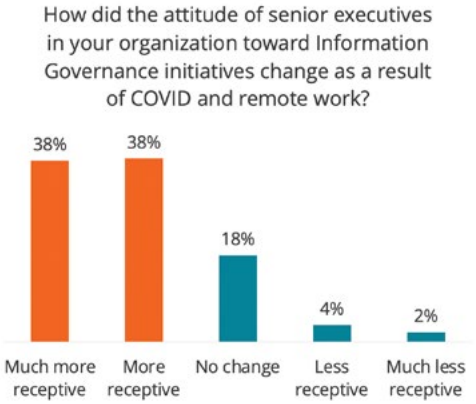
In 2021, the Intelligence Unit of The Economist (*IT's changing mandate in an age of disruption,* underwritten by Appian Software) considered the current state of business/IT alignment in light of the challenges generated by the pandemic. Among their conclusions:

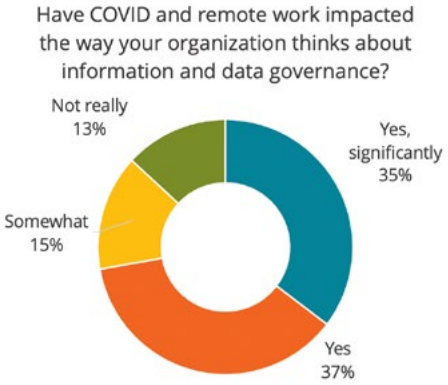
- The pandemic has shone a harsh light on the shortcomings of existing IT systems.
- Capacity is a significant source of apprehension.
- IT teams' control over their digital infrastructure and strategy is slipping.
- Collaboration between IT and non-IT teams is strong, but many believe that their organizations would benefit if collaboration was stronger. Data is an area of particular strain.
- The technologies seen as most important to the success of organizations over the next 12 months are cloud computing, AI and machine learning, data science and analytics, and automation.
- Executives have mixed views on whether they possess the skills to address the challenge.

Leading edge organizations are now not only thinking about how to better align business strategy and IT strategy, but how to extend the alignment even further into information governance, and more specifically M365 governance. The explosion of remote work necessitated by the pandemic accelerated this journey. Organizations suddenly woke up to the business imperative of automating how they govern information, regardless of where users are located or where content is created.

During the pandemic, M365 capabilities — and especially Microsoft Teams — were deployed rapidly and without a lot of planning, out of the sheer necessity of getting "something" in place. The good news in all of this is that the pandemic finally woke up many senior executives to the need to manage their organization's information more strategically.

COVID has changed attitudes toward remote work and governance.





As a result of the pandemic, organizations have begun to think more strategically about information and records governance and the role of M365 in their overall IT strategy. In particular, large organizations (over 1,000 employees) are in a better position post-pandemic to truly understand the key drivers for governance: regulatory compliance, privacy, security, cost, and process transformation. The opportunity now is to translate this increased awareness into actionable plans, which in most cases means using the levers that the executive suite cares about as a backdoor to achieve information governance ends.

"The adoption of remote work for almost all employees made the company realize how important information/ process management is."

survey participant

"C-level executives are interested in Teams but not so much in governance."

survey participant

We've had 30 years of every employee creating hundreds of files every month. It's not enough to talk about retention and disposition. These are not the buzzwords that get projects funded. When I talk about information chaos, I think privacy, data minimization, and cybersecurity are all in the same bucket. Privacy, data minimization, and cybersecurity are more important at the executive level than retention and governance and records management. Positioning what I do against these corporate priorities has helped me and my team to get more visibility and attention — and funding.

The number one driver for me is the dollars and cents associated with the storage contract. And the idea that for every dollar and cent I save the return on investment is adding value back to the organization, especially in terms of compensation for people who deserve it.

Our value drivers in information management seem to always focus on risk avoidance. That makes it difficult to show value added when you're in there competing for money for projects. Risk management is a big piece of what we need to focus on in information management. In addition, we partner closely with our data privacy folks, because they have the ear of the senior leaders.

Why bother with governance? 1) privacy and security; 2) efficiency; 3) legal and compliance concerns

"Senior executives continue to ignore the problems and are determined to continue business as dysfunctionally 'normal' as it was before COVID."

survey participant

Aligning business, IT, and M365 strategies is an objective for many organizations, but the reality is that this alignment often fails. To achieve alignment, organizations need to pause before rolling out M365 governance at scale and systemically think through and document their strategy.

Step 1: Vision | Establish an information management vision which aligns with your business objectives. Identify business priorities for the next few years (e.g., improve customer engagement, reduce operational costs).

Step 2: Critical Success Factors | Determine critical success factors for achieving your information management vision. Do an information management maturity assessment to document the current situation (as-is situation), but also to identify what the business thinks should be improved (to-be situation).

Step 3: Requirements | Determine use cases that need to be supported. Identify, prioritize, and group use cases that need to be supported instead of wasting time on documenting a long list of must-have and should-have requirements that quickly will be out of date.

Step 4: Blueprint | Determine the foundation for success. Determine required frameworks and technologies to meet your requirements and critical success factors (e.g., corporate metadata with master data values, site configuration with default metadata that information inherent, retention labels to automate records management, sensitivity labels to automate information protection, governance roles for continuous improvement).

Step 5: Establish a plan with quick-wins. Create a plan for improvement — get the foundation in place, run proof-of-concepts for different use cases, be fluid to demonstrate value to the business, and fast-track the transition.

Step 6: Business Case | Determine the business benefits of change. Document the business benefits of the above, including the potential savings from retiring legacy ECM systems.

"I've seen tools that I requested for years be implemented in the past two, where previously it had been viewed as an unnecessary expense."

survey participant

"Senior executives always had Information Governance initiatives floating on the periphery of their concerns, COVID slapped them in the face with it."

survey participant

"Working remotely made us all dependent on being able to easily find information."

survey participant

The pace of change in M365 is a significant challenge | Effective change management is more important than ever before.

SharePoint was first introduced in 2001 — twenty-one years ago. The same year that SharePoint was introduced, Ray Kurzweil (of Singularity fame) noted, "The future will be far more surprising than most observers realize: few have truly internalized the implications of the fact that the rate of change itself is accelerating."

The launch of SharePoint began a series of triennial versions and innovations over the course of two decades that *seemed* swift and accelerating. But in large-scale organizations, things moved a bit more deliberately. Most surveys taken in the year *after* one of those triennial SharePoint introductions found a bell curve of users -- 10% on the newest and greatest version, and a long-tail of deployments still stuck in earlier versions. This created a vast number of unmanaged and subsequently abandoned SharePoint sites, leaving a significant gap in records management and increased organizational risk.

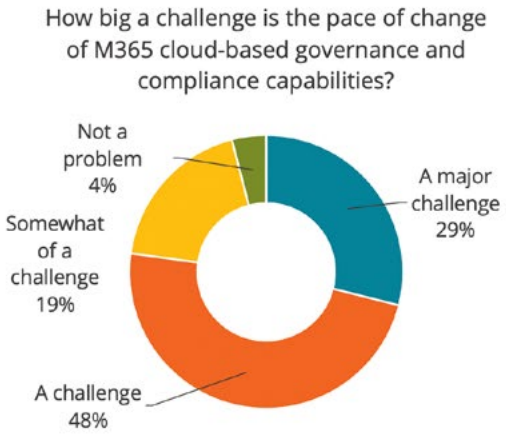
The shift to the cloud and M365 — dramatically accelerated by the pandemic and demands of remote work — changed everything. Deployment of M365 — fueled by Teams — exploded, often with little thought given to the governance implications created by the presence of such powerful tools in so many untrained hands.

M365 has moved further up the chain. For years, IT has thrown tools out there and didn't tell people how to use them. During the pandemic, a lot of people started moving over to Teams. Many departments took everything from their shared drives and just dumped it into Teams without bothering to clean it up beforehand.

Information managers now have two sets of challenges: 1) reasserting control over the sprawl that occurred during the pandemic; and 2) keeping up with the pace of change on the M365 platform itself, now freed from the constraints of triennial updates. For 77% of organizations, the pace of change in the M365 cloud is a challenge, creating an additional set of challenges as all of this change rolls down to unsuspecting end users.

I think the biggest challenge we have is just keeping up with the changes that keep coming constantly from Microsoft. I get the daily change notifications from Microsoft and the weekly summary. Even with this, I must dig down to figure out exactly what is going on and whether it affects us. You need a full time person to keep up with it, and we just don't have that capability.

Pace of change in the cloud a challenge for 77% of organizations.



In terms of end users, how are organizations addressing the change management challenge in M365? Even though the following items are those often found on many change management lists, they are worth reiterating in the context of M365.

1. Provide direct help and support as soon as the need arises. Through proactive action, organizations can keep isolated problems from becoming a tidal wave of concern.

2. Do not skimp on end user training, and more specifically end user training that is timely and in the context of the work that is being performed.

3. Get executives involved in the change you are trying to generate, and do not be shy about enlisting them in making the change happen.

Responsiveness, training, and management support key to overcoming M365 change management issues.

A well-planned change management program not only addresses issues when a system is launched, but before launch when the system is being planned, and well after launch when reinforcement is needed.

- **Outcome |** Agree with stakeholders on the behaviors that should change.
- **Personas |** Segment the audience based on personas to ensure relevant and useful training.
- **Engaging |** Make courses memorable, fun, interactive, and enable attendees to also learn from each other.
- **Repetitive |** First educate attendees in the why, then the how, and then require them to do it during the training.
- **Applicable |** Make it easy to remember and use the new knowledge with hands-on exercises, checklists, and on-demand repetition.
- **Measurable |** Define key performance metrics to identify how well the training changes behaviors.

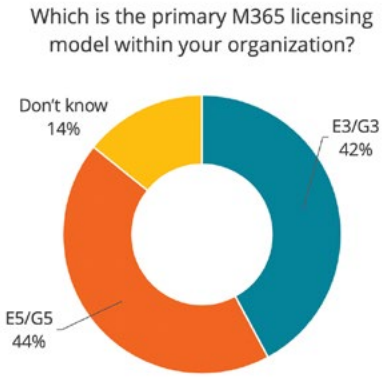
M365 automated governance and compliance adoption is still in the early stages | Most organizations have not caught up with capabilities of the platform.

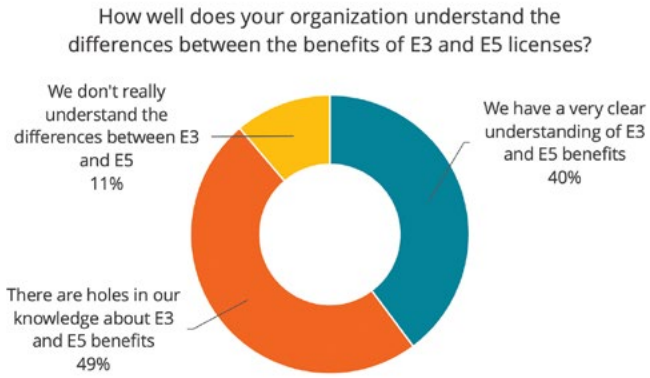
Given the depth and breadth of the governance, compliance, and security changes introduced in M365, it is no surprise that organizations using the platform — especially large ones — are having a difficult time keeping up. As with any critical enterprise platform, much of what you can accomplish in the near-term depends on your starting point. Buying an M365 license — whether of the E3 or E5 variety — is one thing. Keeping it and leveraging it is another.

Even understanding the differences between E3 and E5 in the context of governance is a challenge for many organizations. If set up properly, organizations can accomplish a great deal with an E3 license. Information management capabilities like site provisioning, retention labels, sensitivity labels, and managed metadata are all available in E3. However, many organizations have yet to fully leverage this potential. They would be wise to first master these capabilities before moving onto an E5 upgrade. To do actual Records Management, though, requires an E5 license or an add-on to an E3 license.

Looking across the continuum of end users, there are a wide variety of experiences with M365, making general conclusions challenging. Some organizations have already made the decision to standardize upon the E5 platform, and are now focused on adoption and integration issues. Others are still trying to make the decision whether to move from E3 to E5. And still others have not yet deployed M365 in a strategic fashion when it comes to governance, but rather in a piecemeal way to take advantage of individual components like email, Office applications, and Teams.

Re E3 and E5 benefits, users are confused about what they have and what it does.

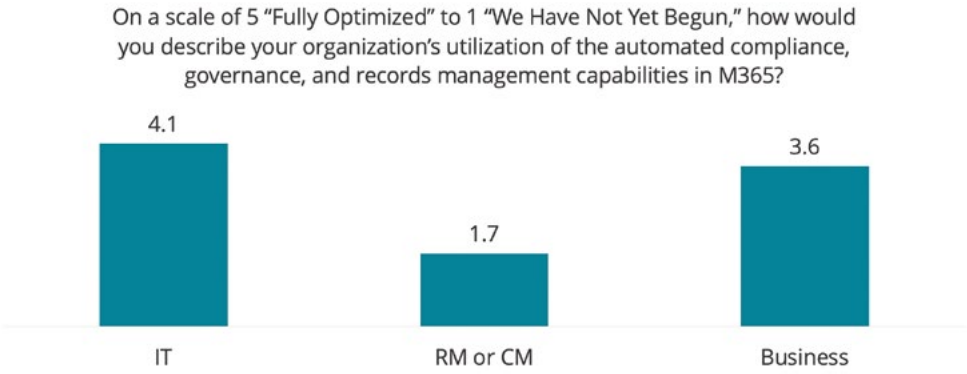


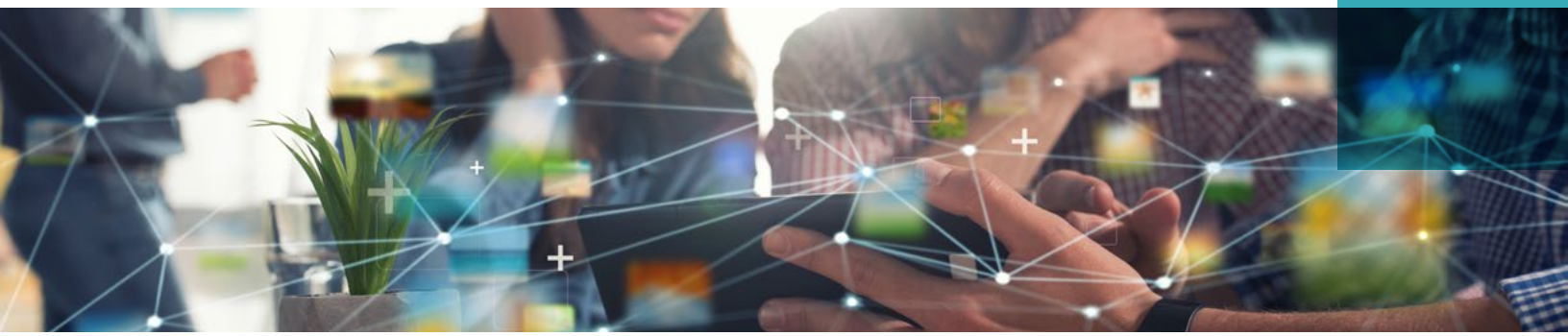


Only 21% of organizations report that they have fully optimized the automated governance, compliance, and records management capabilities of M365, and 22% report that they have not even begun.

A huge gap exists in most organizations between the *reality* of how extensively M365 automated governance has been adopted and *perceptions* among IT and business staff. This "wishful thinking" gap is fairly common on a variety of governance concerns, but is particularly noteworthy with regards to M365 governance. A key challenge for IG professionals in getting funding for governance projects is to reposition governance — which is often viewed as a necessary evil among business executives — as an enabler for the objectives that the business does care about — security, user productivity, and customer value. Likewise, IG professionals need to help their IT colleagues better understand the unique challenges associated with managing unstructured information — *content* — at large scale.

A huge gap exists between the REALITY of M365 automated governance and IT and Business perceptions.





What role will the M365 governance platform play in your organization?

The history of enterprise content management as a set of capabilities often deployed to solve specific mission-critical, large-scale departmental problems means that most organizations have multiple content management systems in play. Given this, how are organizations envisioning the role of M365 governance moving forward?

- As an out-of-the-box governance solution for M365 content?
- As a governance solution ultimately for more than just M365 content?
- As a solution that will be complemented by other third party solutions?
- As one repository among many that will be governed by something else?

M365 is our platform. Like it or not, we have fully embraced it and we're going to be migrating from other content management systems into SharePoint. We've started a multiyear project implementing the information privacy protection module. We have over 20 years' worth of shared drive data, and we're in a massive project to clean up there and move everything to SharePoint or Teams.

We're retiring existing content systems other than M365 process by process, but all of them eventually need to go.

M365 has emerged as the way we want to govern unstructured information in our organization. Our objective is to push as much as possible from other repositories into a managed M365 environment.

Our IT strategy basically drove our approach as to how we would implement M365 and the role it would play. We had thousands of ad hoc systems that we were struggling to maintain. We couldn't keep them current, and interoperability was a struggle or simply impossible. A decision was made to buy tools out of the box, which meant that we needed to modify our processes and our approach after the fact based on those tools.

One thing is clear — all that is manual must be automated in order to truly transform. Leading edge organizations are realizing that manual information classification approaches create large burdens on end users, increase compliance risks, and require significant end user training and cooperation. The new governance capabilities in M365 allow organizations to first automate classification processes, and then leverage machine learning to improve them — IF these capabilities are configured properly.

With regards to the role of M365 re other platforms, "it depends."

Where is M365 automated governance headed?

What kinds of M365 challenges and capabilities are the most experienced organizations focused upon? A look at the responses for just these organizations (those ranking themselves a "4" or "5" on the optimization scale and representing organizations with 100 or more employees) provides a summary of the decisions that organizations will need to make as they move from M365 license purchase to M365 adoption.

- **The percentage of organizations with a significant volume of permanent records and retention periods greater than seven years or permanent is striking:**

  11% of organizations = "up to 20%" of records have permanent or long-term retention periods
  32% of organizations = "more than 20%" of records have permanent or long-term retention periods

- **The three most important reasons that people search, discover, or retrieve inactive information and records are (out of seven choices):**

  60% = Internal audit
  51% = Improve decision making
  48% = External/regulatory audit

- **The M365 Governance and Compliance capabilities most likely to be a focus over the next 12-24 months (out of an overall list of 12 possibilities):**

  35% = Records management
  32% = Legal discovery
  30% = Retention policies
  29% = Business process integration

- **The primary methods in M365 in use (or will be shortly) for automatically applying labels to content are:**

  84% = Specific types of sensitive information
  59% = Keywords or searchable properties
  27% = Trainable classifier match

- **73% "plan to" or "are considering" using record versioning in M365.**

- **The primary strategy organizations are taking with regards to migration into M365 (only one "best choice" was allowed in this question) varies considerably:**

  32% = Use Azure auto-classification to categorize files and images and then migrate into M365.
  22% = We plan to use M365 to access and utilize OTHER data repositories.
  19% = Migrate active data to M365 and everything else to a third party repository.
  15% = Lift and shift everything into M365 as quickly as possible.
  12% = Eliminate ROT (redundant, obsolete, trivial) content using a third party tool and then migrate.

- **The following challenges/concerns are MOST important when thinking about the overall role of M365 governance (respondents chose three out of a list of ten):**

  40% = Keeping up with changing regulatory retention and privacy laws.
  38% = Data security.
  34% = Scalability issues: search, storage and processing.
  33% = Limitation of scope in M365 governance (retention and disposition).
  32% = Keeping up with the latest changes in M365.
  30% = Managing structured data (vs. documents).

- **The most important third-party solutions to integrate with your M365 governance strategy are:**

  31% = Analytics
  22% = Existing records management solutions

Expert Panel Recommendations

Flexibility. My best answer to the migration challenge into M365 is — "It depends." A cost benefit analysis must be done, because sometimes the cost and complexity may be much greater than the benefit. Does it make sense to migrate if you have a large-scale managed service that's holding some of your information? It depends.

Start with the obvious. Start with shared drives. Microsoft is working towards a decent roadmap to move forward on the governance front. So start with what is utterly unmanaged — shared drives — and get information out of shared drives and into some sort of managed M365 environment. And use the *system* to govern it because all end users hate it when we ask them to do it.

Test, test, test before deploying. Fight for a development environment, so you can test everything. I set up a committee of our M365 team leads and we are diligently working through a transformation that includes file share cleanup, structured data, and all sorts of other things. M365 ended up being the driver for many of our conversations around governance. Don't be afraid to pivot all your information governance conversations to M365, because M365 is so ubiquitous. *Everybody* touches M365 in some way.

Proceed at your own pace. One size does not fit all when it comes to E3 vs. E5. We still have E3 licenses for certain levels of the organization — the people that just need to use some of the M365 tools. You need to weigh the risks, benefits, the cost, and your company's appetite for really digging into M365. It takes a lot to utilize all the functionality. It is easy to make infrastructure wide mistakes in the cloud. Plan properly, talk to others, and learn where the pitfalls are.

Commit to staying current. Microsoft offers a monthly roadmap review for each one of the major M365 workloads. That slide deck is crucial to understanding what is going on. If you get it, count yourself lucky. If not, ask for it. It can be up to 150 slides depending on the month, but it does annotate and describe every single change that is listed on the roadmap.

Think about HOW you will make decisions before you need to make them. Develop a decision matrix to help you decide what you need to do now and what can be put off to later. This is important because if you can decide on the matrix and the criteria *before* you face a decision, you will have a common frame of reference and strategy that is transparent to everyone.

Learn from others who have been there. Build your network within your industry and talk with them and see if they are willing to share their lessons learned.

***Selectively* use consultants.** Utilize third party experts and consultants — first making sure they actually know something about M365 automated governance — to speed your journey. Make sure your advisors are committed to "teaching you to fish" rather than becoming a permanent part of your staff. Otherwise, there is no real benefit to embracing out-of-the-box solutions.

Get a seat at the table. Make sure you have a seat at the table during the discussions about the role and prominence of M365 — and the governance structure that goes along with it.

Start with processes. Look at your core processes and what the business is doing before you bring in a new set of tools. At the end of the day, you're trying to improve the *processes* in your organization and better support the *people* responsible for them. Look at processes and people first.

Think big. When M365 was first introduced, I went in and asked for the sun, the moon, and the stars. And I got one star. But I was happy when I got my one star. Ask for it all and then work with the part you get.

Just do it. Be bold, be brave, and just get started. It is inevitable that some mistakes will be made and assembling an M365 governance strategy is built layer by layer, like a game of Tetris. It's hard to go wrong with the out of the box stuff; just start toggling some things on. Are there tips and tricks? Absolutely. But find your courage and get started.

Note: The recommendations section was completely generated by the MER Expert panel, and we are particularly grateful for this contribution.

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