



Information sharing and information archiving - are they at odds?

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While this column focuses on the two notions of information sharing and information archiving within development environments, it is applicable to any environment where it is necessary to handle these two requirements that are often at odds with each other. Unless a team consists of only one person, there is always a need for information to be shared between team members, as well as for information to be stored or archived for historical purposes.

Numerous methodologies exist that allow for the analysis, design and development of software, from heavyweight methodologies such as the Rational Unified Process to lightweight methodologies such as Agile Modeling and Rapid Application Development (RAD). Irrespective of how different they are in terms of deliverables, the methodologies all have two things in common:

1. A need to store information with regard to decisions made, analysis and design results, and other project-related information; and
2. facilitating communication between team members.

These two requirements are often at odds with each other because information is normally kept for archival purposes in the form of a hardcopy, for example as paper documents, electronic documents on a CD or hard drive, or even on micro-fiche. Yet, paper is one of the worst ways of communicating directly with a person!

The best method of communicating information is in a face-to-face setting where all the senses of the people involved are used. When one is involved in a face-to-face discussion, one can see the reactions of the other people, hear inflections in their voices and observe their body language for any signs of agreement or disagreement on the issues. One can even make drawings to underscore a point. All of the senses are involved in transmitting and receiving the information that is being communicated. As one gets removed from some of the senses, for example when the people cannot get together and instead use a videophone, the quality of the information-sharing experience drops. If this method is not possible and the group uses interactive e-mail, it drops even further. Eventually we get the worst kind of information sharing - paper-based sharing - which uses only the sense of sight.

Before numerous e-mails arrive that point out how good paper-based information sharing is, let me highlight the difference. Paper or stored electronic documents are not sufficient for dynamic information sharing. It is, however, best for archiving and keeping long-term histories. We all know how selective people's memories get when it comes to recalling a conversation of a couple of weeks or months ago.

How can one marry these two requirements that appear to be at odds? One of the

alternatives that some companies are using is to record all sessions with a video camera, along with whiteboards etc. Thus the interaction between members in the session is recorded and kept for archival purposes. This in itself is not enough though - the recording must also be annotated and indexed. This allows one to quickly determine where important moments occurred during the videotaped meeting or session. One can then easily and quickly forward to important moments.

Another option is to have a digital camera available to photograph important designs and ideas that are drawn on a whiteboard. The drawings can then be kept in either electronic or hardcopy (printed) format. Companies can also invest in an electronic whiteboard that copies its contents.

In today's fast-paced environment, the luxury of producing reams of documentation is fast disappearing. Companies need to find smarter ways to share and store their information than simply producing reams of documents.

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ISSN 1560-683X

Published by [InterWord Communications](#) for the Centre for Research in Web-based Applications,
Rand Afrikaans University