

Research Note

Information Needs and Using Information Audits

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Abstract: This research examines the role of an information audit as a tool for assessing organizational business information needs. In a field where there are few to no standards for implementing an information needs assessment, it is important to understand each audit in the unique context of each business. While there are no universal guidelines, there are still some useful principles that can be extracted.

Keywords: *information assessment, information audit, small business, business needs*

Introduction

Starting and running a small business is no easy task. There are almost countless challenges, decisions, and considerations on a daily basis that must be handled adroitly by small-business owners and employees. But one thing that most businesses share is the goal to expand and grow into a stronger, better organization. A key way to move a business forward towards reaching that goal is to identify the organizational information needs, and how those can be met. One approach is to perform an information audit on your organization.

Information Audit As Assessment

So what does that mean? There are a wide variety of meanings that can be associated with “information audit”, such as “information needs”, “information assessment”, and “information workflow”. It is important to understand that there are some discrepancies between understandings of what these terms mean, and different applications depending on the approach taken. There is a definite lack of industry definitions as well – an “information audit” might mean something completely different to a financial institution compared to a public hospital or small IT business. There is generally a more technical connotation associated with the term information audit – an examination of information *systems* versus the holistic flow of information throughout an organization. A useful definition for an information audit is that crafted by Botha & Boon (2002):

An information audit entails the systematic examination of the information resources, information use, information flows and the management of these in an organisation. It involves the identification of users’ information needs and how effectively (or not) these are being met. In addition to this, the (monetary) cost and the value of the information resources to the organisation are calculated and determined. All this is done with a view to determining whether the organizational information environment contributes to the attainment of the organisational objectives and furthermore, to the establishment

and implementation of effective information management principles and procedures. This is done so that information can be used to help the organisation maintain its competitive edge.¹

This definition is useful for different organizations because it is holistic enough to include the non-system sources of information within the firm. The purpose aligns as well with business goals, since the audit, as stated by Botha and Boon, is meant to allow for increasing a competitive edge and further organizational initiatives.

Identifying Information Resources

An information audit can cover a variety of information resources and information sources at a business. Firstly, there is the internal information within the organization itself. This can include everything from the operational and strategic information – from website content to style documentation, financial data and future planning. There is also tacit information made up of an employee's professional network, and the explicit content produced for clients and the press.²

Other types of information that might be important include relevant industry information, competitive information, and government information. Industry information can be knowledge about business best practices, trends, and other resources within the industry an organization associates. A business also wants to know what competitive information it possesses, keeping up with what competitors are doing and producing. Finally, it is important for some businesses to know about government requirements and standards, but in general there are

¹ Botha, Hanneri. "The information audit: principles and guidelines." *Unpublished Master's dissertation*. Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2000.

² Richards, Leigh. *What Types of Information Resources Does a Business Usually Need?* n.d. <http://smallbusiness.chron.com/types-information-resources-business-usually-need-4753.html>

simply just many resources for small businesses available from the federal government.³

Why An Information Audit

According to Botha and Boon, “the main aim of an information audit is specific to the environment in which it is performed. If one were to attempt to generalise the aim of an information audit, it could be said that an information audit would be performed with the purpose of collecting the information that is needed to manage organisational information resources effectively, so that organisational objectives are met.”

How to Do An Information Audit

There are a number of aspects that must be considering when undertaking an information needs assessment through an audit. Unfortunately, there are no universal rules or guidelines for performing audits that can be applied across organizations. The organizational environment and context will determine what kind of approach can be taken for an audit, what direction it takes, and what the final product looks like. Ultimately, an information audit needs to be defined by the mission, goals and functions of an organization. A critical prerequisite developing the direction and methodology for an information audit is “a clearly defined scope and purpose.”⁴

While there is no standard set of activities or approaches for an information assessment, there are a few generalizations can be made⁵.

Prerequisites

There are a few elements that should be present before a business implements an information audit. There should be:

- Support from top management

³ Richards

⁴ Botha, Hanneri, and J.A. Boon. "The Information Audit: Principles and Guidelines." *Libri* 53 (2002): 23-38

⁵ The following have been adapted from Botha & Boon 2002.

- Skilled staff to conduct the assessment and the audit, or resources to hire consultants to conduct the audit.
- Sufficient time to complete the research, and time to follow-up on recommendations.
- Free access to relevant information and the right people.
- A culture of acceptance of the audit by employees.

Stages

Many information audits go through the following stages.

- Planning of the audit itself.
- Performing an information needs assessment
- Conducting an information inventory
- Costing and valuing information resources
- Analysis of Findings
- Producing Final Report (with recommendations)

Activities

There are a few general activities that are often used during an information audit.

- Defining the organizational environment.
- Data collection (by conducting a physical tour and/or obtaining relevant documentation and/or interviews and analysis of the collected information).
- The identification of strong and weak points.
- The compilation of the final report and the presentation of the findings to management.

Conclusion

The value of doing an information needs assessment can come from a variety of results. Closing information gaps within a business can make processes more efficient, create clearer lines of communication, and strengthen the information foundation. It is important to tailor the approach to the needs of an organization, so that the audit process is informed by the identified business needs of the firm.