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10 Golden rules for an integrated action management system

Strategic Safety Systems

This gives 10 tips for people who want to compile their own integrated action management systems for QA, health, safety or environmental issues. The methodology is based on Microsoft Access or similar databases, can give benefit for little initial effort and can result in a dramatic reduction in the work of managing such issues.

For about 20 years, I've watched people get into a state over managing actions that arise from quality, health, safety or environmental issues. What tends to happen is that there are lots of forms, meeting minutes, audit reports and all the other stuff that seems to accumulate. Typically, people file the meeting minutes, only to get them out just before the next meeting and realise that there were actions they should have taken. Quite often, people create spreadsheets to manage actions, and then you end up with a collection of spreadsheets which just add to the problem. People get overloaded with work (which is often additional to the work from their primary role) and often important items get missed.

In short, there is the tendency to fail to have a coherent approach.

Done properly, you can easily overcome this. There are some systems on the market, such as our own INTACT system, that provide a fully configured solution, but there is no reason why you can't do it yourself. In fact, we compiled the predecessor of INTACT within the company where I worked to address our own problems; it was not the offspring of a software company.

So, if you are going to do it yourself, here are 10 golden rules to setting up your own action management system:

1. Recognise that issues and actions are all the same, no matter their source.

No matter where they come from, we end up with issues, topics or whatever you'd like to call them, with actions arising from them. Most issues are simple, with either a single action or even no action, whilst others can be more complex with several actions, to different people, with different timescales. But no matter whether it's a customer complaint, an audit item or a safety incident, you still end up with an issue that needs managing. Also, the only reason for raising an action is to address an issue, so every action can be linked to the issue that generated it.

Because of this, I suggest that what you need to do is have one table of issues and one table of actions. Have a field in the issues table (I'll explain about this later) that specifies the source of the issue, eg a non-conformance, and a field in the actions table specifying to which issue the action is linked.

2. Transfer as much as possible into a database

Rather than having lots of records all over the place, have just one database. So this database can store your incidents, inspections, internal problems, customer complaints, meeting minutes, audit reports and so on. That way, we can have an integrated system where we can see the complete picture. Don't worry if this sounds unwieldy; we address this later.

3. Use a database rather than a spreadsheet

Don't use a spreadsheet. At a pinch, a spreadsheet can be used as a database, but they are not structured as a relational database and you make a lot of work for yourself. In addition, spreadsheets can only have one user at a time, so that compromises rule 5. We use Microsoft Access because it gives lots of flexibility and you don't have to be a database software expert to set it up. There are some other similar database programs on the market. Purist database experts don't think a lot of Access; for complex systems with masses of data it has its limitations but we are not talking about that here. What we do want is something with flexibility.

Just to confuse you a bit, I will explain 2 database terms which I will use later. One is "field" which is a bit like a column in a spreadsheet. So we could have one field called "Date", another one called "Description" and so on. Then we have "records" which is a bit like a row in a spreadsheet.

As mentioned above, I'd advise having 2 key tables;

- *Issues* which would have fields like date, description, source, department, etc.
- *Actions* which would have fields like proposed action, due date, assignee, date completed, with the action linked to the issue from which it arose.

The main reason for separating these is to allow you to have more than one action for an issue; there may be a "quick fix" to keep things running and longer term actions to fully address a problem.

4. Keep it simple

Don't try to guess every situation. What you will find is that as it gets used, you will see other features that you will need. The old 80:20 rule applies, where you get 80% of the benefits from the first 20% of the system. So start simply, but have in mind the ability to develop the system. I'd strongly recommending having a front end and back end so you can have a development version of the front end yet allow people to enter data via the existing front end.

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5. Within reason, give as much access as possible

This is probably one of the biggest benefits. As soon as information is shared and made available, you will be surprised how many ideas for improvements arise. There are restrictions that you may want, such as limiting who can sign-off issues and who can edit certain bits of data, but in general, encourage multiple access.

Some people like to add some security features, but keep these simple if you feel you need them.

6. Only enter data once

This links in with Rule 5. Rather than have forms being hand-written and then typed into some other record, why not have people enter the information directly?

Remember that as soon as you have multiple sets of information, you have 3 problems:

- You are paying people to enter data twice
- There is a time delay between one set of data arising and it getting entered in the other system
- Sooner or later, they will differ. Which one is correct?

So don't have meeting minutes and their actions in Word documents and a separate action management database. Have the ability to record the minutes in your database from scratch. And don't enter data into spreadsheets for analysis; get your system to do the analysis for you. Once you've set it up, you can get reports at the click of a button rather than having to specify data ranges in a spreadsheet.

7. Minimise mandatory fields

One of the key ways to get people entering data is to make the system user-friendly, and one sure way of turning people off is to have lots of mandatory fields. The main difficulty with such fields is that it is difficult to anticipate all of the reasons for entering a record and it is quite likely that you will have instances where there is no information relative to the mandatory field. In such circumstances (and I've seen this done many times) people either enter spurious data just to fill the box, or ignore the whole record altogether. In the INTACT system, we only have one mandatory field which is designating whether an action is corrective or preventive.

8. Characterise each issue by its source and have simple filters

So, we've got one big table for issues but this would be unworkable without some filters. I suggested a field call "source"; this is some identification of how the issue arose, such as incident report, inspection, meeting, customer complaint, etc. Rather than entering data in a table, enter it through a form and make the form specific to the source. So you'd have a form for indent reports which would be based on a filter for incident reports and have a default setting of "Incident Report" for the source.

9. Have TO DO lists for all people

This is one of the biggest benefits (some say curse) of an integrated action management system.

Set up a filter so that you can list all the incomplete actions for a single person. Because we've put everything into one database, then instead of having lots of reports, minutes, etc., that a person needs to refer to, they only have the one TO DO list. The reason why it could be regarded as a curse is because actions never go away unless you complete them; some people may have been used to actions being forgotten when they were in disparate sources.

10. Have meaningful management reports

Create a filter so that you can see reports of incomplete actions and group these as overdue and not overdue.

Get the system to do the work for you. For example, if data is being entered for customer complaints, set up reports that give you breakdowns such as counts and cost of complaints for each customer. It would also be worth ensuring that you have a field for complaint type, such as "Goods received late" so you can also get an analysis on this. Have these fields as drop-down boxes to ease data entry and to ensure that you avoid situations where a difference in spelling would give 2 different categories.

Finally, because people can respond to their TO DO list and record the completion of their actions, you can transform meetings. Meetings are no longer bogged down with people reporting their actions; that has already been done. They can become a forum for discussing problems arising out of actions and all the other issues that have arisen.

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