

# What Executives Think About Information Management

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## Why This Topic?

Information managers continuously search for the best ways to measure and communicate the function's value to the organization. They are often cognizant of their users' needs but find it challenging to connect to the upper echelons of the organization – despite knowing that the perspective of organizational leaders is imperative for aligning the information management (IM) function for greatest impact and value. This report examines executives' views on their organizations' IM functions and the role that information must play to further organizational objectives. It also considers executives' information use habits to reveal the gaps that IM leaders must address to fortify IM's value proposition and to uncover opportunities that await information professionals who commit to taking their IM functions to the next level.

### **Methodology**

Our qualitative data on executives comes from Outsell's past qualitative research with IM stakeholders and from recent interviews with five executives in corporate (finance, high-tech, and pharmaceutical), government, and academic institutions conducted specifically for this Briefing.

For the quantitative data in this Briefing, Outsell relied on two sources. We drew data about IM activities from our annual [Information Management Benchmarks survey](#), housed in our Information Markets & Users Database. This data was collected in October of 2007 and included 1,109 IM leader respondents from the corporate, government, academic, and healthcare sectors.

Data on end-user preferences was collected in our [User Market survey](#), last conducted in April of 2007, and includes approximately 407 respondents in executive management positions across sectors (corporate, education, government, healthcare) and industries. This data is also maintained in our Information Markets & Users Database.

For purposes of this Briefing, Outsell defines executives as IM managers' leadership or any C- level position, vice president, or senior director – or their equivalent in a non-corporate environment.

# How Executives View IM

Our research and conversations with executives surfaced a number of common themes and perspectives.

## **Good Decisions Depend on Good Information**

Not surprisingly, the executives in our research all recognize that information is an essential element for successfully operating their functions and the business overall. Information is the foundation on which decisions are made – yet some executives worry that too often, decisions are made without having sufficient information. Another danger is not having the *right* information, exposing companies to risk:

*“To make strong business decisions we should have the best, most timely information. If we don’t have the correct information, we may make faulty decisions.”*

“Knowing what we know” is another imperative put forth by one executive, who believes that a company’s ability to capture and share its information and knowledge will absolutely increase its competitive advantage, and who sees the library’s potential to play a crucial role in enabling the enterprise to manage its knowledge.

The challenge and the opportunity for IM is to capitalize on executives’ recognition of the critical need for information – and, in fact, executives we spoke with firmly note IM’s value and capability in supporting critical decision making. Executives we spoke with also have a sense of the value that IM brings to the organization through its ability to manage costs and access to good, vetted information. Controlling costs is a priority for every leader and it’s clear that executives in our research understand the value of expertise in vendor and content portfolio management in this regard. In a similar vein, the executive we heard from in an academic institution cited providing online access to premium information sources as essential to the organization’s mission.

While executives we talked to recognize IM’s ability to support decision-making and manage content spending, they also say that for the most part, enterprises as a whole have little true understanding of how IM functions operate, what they do, and the value they bring to the organization.

## **IM Must Align with Organizational Goals**

Outsell has long encouraged information professionals to align their functions with their organizations’ strategic imperatives. Executives we spoke with were emphatic about the need for IM leaders to understand the business of their organizations and direct their focus and efforts squarely on stated organizational objectives. Said one VP:

*“The key things for the future are to stay connected to the business, to align with business strategy, and be proactive.”*

Executives counseled IM to understand and work to the core needs of the organization so that IM's products and services remain relevant and resonant. Becoming a student of the organization means garnering a deep and continuous understanding of its drivers, challenges, and goals and explicitly working information delivery to support them. Becoming part of the fabric of the business and focusing on high-level needs is one executive's strong recommendation:

*"Integrate into the business. Know what the CEO is about and work to that. Stay ahead of industry trends and be proactive about serving information around those."*

In an academic setting, the library's *raison d'être* is tied to the research mission of the institution. To further strengthen the library's alignment to this organizational mission, an executive at this organization supports the IM director's initiative of replacing library generalists with scientific specialists or information professionals that are also highly "electronically savvy."

## **More Visibility Required**

When asked to identify the most valuable service offered by their institutional libraries or information centers, 82% of executive respondents to Outsell's survey on information users said their organizations did not have such a function. Putting the same question to respondents in all non-executive job categories, only 41% say their institutions have no such function. In Outsell's opinion, this vast difference likely points to a stunning gap in executives' awareness of IM functions and, in fact, most of the executives we talked to see a clear imperative for information professionals to market and promote what they do. They cite a lack of organizational awareness of the IM function and its capabilities, especially at the highest levels – characterized by the following comments and suggestions for getting in front of decision-makers:

*"'Who?' and 'What?' are frequently asked when the library is mentioned because people at the VP level aren't aware of it. Libraries add an incredible amount of value but they can improve their value by better communicating to executives what the library can do for them."*

*"Lots of selling needs to go on...Senior people don't have a clue that the library is evolving and continues to evolve..."*

*"Send reminders to managers to improve awareness of what the information function does. Do periodic marketing to stay in front of people's awareness."*

*"Raise awareness! Customize reports for executives. Meet with them to talk specifically about the research and its business impact."*

## A Holistic View of Information

When many of the leaders we have talked to think about information challenges within their organizations, they tend to think of externally procured information and internally generated information holistically – as one body of information. They envision IM as pivotal in facilitating knowledge sharing and exchange in two ways: by connecting disparate organizational repositories of information and by linking together people and communities to share expertise and knowledge.

One executive sees IM's most important role as working with IT folks to ensure "findability and that information assets are logically and cogently linked together." This leader sees IT as the plumbers – hooking up the pipes – and IM as the architects – doing the design work, being the key custodians of information, creating the overall picture, and eliminating fragmentation of information.

Another executive envisioned IM as an organizational hub and portrayed the facilitating role this way:

*"The IM group specializes in connecting people with what they need. They provide an architecture – a map – of where all the company information assets are and how they relate to each other."*

Another sees IM's most important role as a "repository of the organization's knowledge and resources" with a secondary responsibility to "be consultants to facilitate transfer of that knowledge."

## The Challenge of Performance Measures

Executives in our interviews were hard put to easily identify performance measures that demonstrate IM's value. Many agreed, however, that a key to solving the value equation is to show successes *tied to enterprise goals*. Another strategy for demonstrating IM's value is to play directly into executives' needs for information, as one VP we spoke with advised:

*"Quantitative measures are important, but the biggest impact would be to get some good wins with executives. Find an issue that an executive cares about and wow her or him with research and information about it. Couple this with cost justifications. Especially for those for whom value of the information function isn't intuitive, this will have impact."*

A number of our interviewees mentioned customer satisfaction as a key measure – especially because of the difficulty of directly tying IM's work to business productivity or success, such as driving innovation or entering a new market.

Another recommended looking at cost savings derived from the efficiency and effectiveness of using research specialists instead of everyone doing their own research and buying all their own subscriptions and content. Many information professionals may already be collecting this cost-benefit data and need to ensure that they communicate the bottom line results to the highest levels of management.

Collecting and communicating anecdotal proof about IM's value is also something that resonates with executives who recommend focusing on the concrete impact that IM research and information delivery has made to the bottom line.

One executive provided an idea of how IM's value can be made more visible by raising awareness through customized reports and then meeting with executives to talk with them specifically about the business impact – to that specific business unit – that IM's research and information has had. This interviewee also recommended giving executives more detailed and specific information right from the executive's dashboard, via a link that's just for executives. This link makes IM's research part of the process – always available, always visible.

# IM and Executives: Gaps and Opportunities

In Outsell’s opinion, which is supported by our conversations with executives, information professionals who aim to bolster their value proposition need to focus on channels and opportunities for better communication with executives, increased integration into the business, and tighter alignment with organizational imperatives.

Yet, IM leaders in general do not actively pursue strategic management practices that help them get closer to executives. As Table 1 indicates, fewer than one-quarter (21%) of information managers use executive advisory boards – with the least activity (14%) occurring in the corporate sector. (Executive advisory boards are used as forums for communication, feedback, and action at the policy or strategic level, compared with user advisory groups that focus more tactically on content and services.) In lieu of executive advisory boards, information managers overall are slightly more likely (26%) to reach out to stakeholders specifically about decisions on content spending, most likely since IM relies on them for funding. Although 44% of information professionals create formal plans for their functions, the apparent lack of stakeholder or executive connection may mean that such plans are not especially well-aligned to greater business needs and direction, resulting in a potential value gap between IM and the executive levels of the organization.

**Table 1. IM Strategic Management Practices**

	Total	Corporate	Government	Education
<i>Base</i>	794	465	144	129
	%	%	%	%
<b>Use of executive advisory boards</b>	21	14	29	35
<b>Formal business or function planning</b>	44	41	50	52
<i>Base</i>	805	471	147	131
	%	%	%	%
<b>Conduct stakeholder meetings related to content portfolio planning</b>	26	26	30	21
<b>Steering committee in place for input into portfolio decisions</b>	12	10	13	18

Source: Outsell’s Information Markets & Users Database, Information Management Benchmark Survey 2007  
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## Executives as Users: Opportunities for IM

The best way to unearth specific opportunities for IM is to go out into the organization and understand requirements by talking to executives, and those who are close to them. Developing ongoing relationships – through mechanisms such as regular stakeholder meetings or the creation of an executive advisory group – will enable information professionals to identify and stay in step with their organizational leaders and specific issues and needs.

In the meantime, Outsell's research on executives' preferences for and behaviors with information reveals some other avenues to consider:

- *Go mobile.* Eighty percent of executives in Outsell's Information Markets & Users Database use wireless handheld devices – more than any other type of worker. And, while the majority of use is for phone calls or text messages, a full 22% of executives receive news and other media on their devices – a number we expect to grow. Matching up an executive's business focus and requirements with a targeted news feed delivered to her PDA is a customized and easy way to put real time, critical information literally in the hands of a decision-maker whenever and wherever she needs it.
- *Blog your way onto executives' radars.* A surprising number of executives (44%) count blogs among the way they consume information. Do you know what blogs your CEO follows – and why? By getting a handle on your top executives' blog preferences and sources you have the opportunity to connect them to other, similarly valuable voices and communities that they may not know about. (You can use the specialized blog search engine [Technorati](#) to identify authoritative bloggers on any topic.) Another consideration is to determine how executives are consuming blog information. Are they receiving RSS feeds, as 35% of executives we surveyed do? What blog reader do they use? Think about adding value to their experience by integrating their preferred blog feeds into a dashboard or other targeted platform for executive information.
- *Monitor and report on the competition.* Forty percent of executives – across all segments and industries – cite the lack of competitive information as their No. 1 information gap. This should be a “no brainer” for information professionals. It is critical to understand the business and the competitive landscape in order to deliver the “right stuff” to the organization. Once you've structured what to deliver, applying widgets and feeds into executive dashboards is one easy approach to channeling targeted competitive information into executives' workflows. Note that some executives we talked with feel overwhelmed by the volume of available information. For the “less is more” crowd, IM has an additional opportunity to pump up the value of competitive tracking by summarizing, synthesizing, and providing analysis in an easily digestible format.
- *“Do for” may be the ticket.* Executives average more time per week (12 hours) on information tasks than do workers in all other functions combined (10.5 hours), and spend 14% more time looking for information than others do. Although fewer than one-fifth (17%) of executives report major problems in getting the information they need, those who do report difficulties cite lack of staff support (that is, people who can search for information on their behalf) as the biggest obstacle. Information professionals might consider a specially designed, high-touch, highly customized tier of service to drive down wasted time and ratchet up productivity around executive information consumption.
- *What's the internet got that you haven't?* Only 13% of executives turn to their organizations' intranets or portals when seeking information, compared with 22% of workers in all other functions. Sixty-five percent of executives use the internet as their first choice, compared with 52% of other workers. If executives are not using the portals and platforms that IM spends good money and time to develop, and if they perceive the internet as *the go-to source*, it's no wonder that IM funding is increasingly hard to maintain. It is imperative for information professionals to differentiate their role and value within the competitive information landscape and articulate that value to executives through increased visibility, promotion, and awareness.

# Imperatives for Information Managers

Executives we talked with are clear about the importance and value of information, and tend to agree that the best way to prove value is to show it, rather than to tell about it. Our conversations with executives indicate that if there's one magic bullet when it comes to metrics, it's to tie IM deliverables to business impact, both short-term and long-term. But, our research can serve only as a gateway to real knowledge about your own executives' views. We make the following recommendations for IM leaders who want to know what executives think:

## 1. Talk to Your Own Executives

Benchmarks and research are good proxies but can't substitute indefinitely for information about your own organization. Only by engaging your own leaders can you understand the unique goals, perspectives, and cultural boundaries of your organization. Use this knowledge specifically to guide IM's direction, strategies, and plans.

## 2. Segment and Target Your Audience

This follows from talking to your own executives. Know what is meaningful for different players and deliver according to what you've learned. The "wow" factor on service deliverables will differ according to executives' individual responsibilities and needs. *One size fits all* doesn't work at this level.

## 3. Show Value through Action

Send the IM value message to executives by working to executives' pain points and delivering something unforgettable. This is the impact that resonates firmly in a way that numbers and statistics will not.

## 4. Drive Awareness of IM

Use the delivery point of your research as an opportunity to talk some more with executives to stay visible and cement awareness. Walk them through the research you provide and call attention to its benefits and impact. Use the opportunity to understand how else you can partner with the executive and his or her group.

## 5. Enlist Executive Support

Executives to whom IM reports tend to have a better grasp on the value of IM than their colleagues do – mostly from what they've learned "on the job" about the function. Enlist your managing executives to help drive awareness: provide success stories, data, or sound bites that they can use when talking to their peers in their own operations or budget reviews, strategic planning sessions, etc.

## 6. Think Like an Executive

Filter everything IM does through an "executive lens." Consider everything you do in terms of "what's in it for them" and be prepared to articulate your function that way. Deliver your value message in the language of your executives to drive home the benefit that they and the larger organization derive from IM products and services.

## **7. Think Expansively**

Executives think holistically about information – so take your cues accordingly to identify snarls or barriers to information flow within the organization and then propose a team or a project to address them. Take an entrepreneurial approach to solving information problems that you know your expertise can help to address.



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