



Information
In Transition:
Smarter Working
In The New Normal



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Foreword

Government's Smarter Working Team

Government Property Agency,
Executive Agency of The Cabinet Office



The Coronavirus pandemic has created a double stress test for the principles of smarter working across the public sector.

Firstly, the upheaval caused by shifting almost the entire workforce to home and remote working in a matter of days. And, secondly, the added workload and pressures of directing and administering new policies and strategies to cope with the unprecedented impact of the pandemic. As often happens in times of crisis, the effect has been to both clarify and accelerate, telling us where, when and how smarter working should be deployed for maximum benefit to the organisation, its workforce, service provision and citizens. And exactly how much its success hinges on enabling technology such as integrated systems, data and records management. The implications of all this for the public sector, and those responsible for smarter working, is considerable. Improving the public sector's workspaces, encouraging strong leadership, building the right inclusive culture and improving processes lies at the heart of our decision-making.

By creating digitally-enabled workspaces that are flexible, mobile, secure and geared to the needs of today's workforce, the public sector can reap the benefits from a digitally forward thinking workforce through effective cloud based, information management and collaboration systems that enable effective smarter working and inevitably make change happen. As a team that leads the adoption of smarter working across government and encouraging it across the wider public sector through initiatives like the smarter working awards programme and the smarter working practitioner community, we are encouraged by the findings of the 'Information in Transit' survey, which took place between February and March 2020. As this survey was taken before the Coronavirus pandemic it may be that advances have already been made in some of these areas and good practice is already being improved upon.

Although work remains to be done, the direction and drive right across the public sector is taking us toward a future that enables us to work at our best whenever and wherever that happens to be. There's been a lot of talk about the 'new normal' in the last few months, but when we look back on this unprecedented time in our history, the normalisation of smarter working in creating 'great places to work' may well be one of the very few positive things to come out of it.

Introduction

Across the public sector, work is underway to support smart workforce collaboration, integrating records, systems and data into a single view and putting data and information processing at the heart of public service. Many of these goals came into sharp focus with the advent of Covid-19. Almost overnight, workers had to access the systems and data they needed to do their job from home. Communication between teams and with service users needed to be increasingly virtual.

Earlier this year SynApps and GovNewsDirect commissioned the 'Information in Transition' survey to examine public sector information management processes. The survey responses shine a light on the technical and cultural factors affecting workers' ability to access the information they need to provide public services.

A key aim of the Government's Smarter Working initiative is to create a digital workplace that is mobile and accessible, enabling collaboration, document sharing and communication. The survey reveals some good progress towards that aim, but there is still work to do. It found that public sector workers are widely using unconnected, legacy information systems and some are even using paper-based systems in parts of their operations. The objective of flexible and remote working remains a stretch goal for many organisations.

The need to address these challenges has become even more pressing as the public sector transitions to delivering services in a new normal that will almost certainly feature an increase in smarter working. Key to this will be technology that allows easy access to critical information wherever employees happen to be working.

In many ways, these changes were underway before the coronavirus crisis. How effectively they become embedded from now on will be central to how well the UK public sector manages its service delivery in future.



What The Survey Results Tell Us

Too much time is spent on information retrieval at the expense of information processing

In a data-led public sector, the speed and efficiency with which employees can access information is absolutely critical to performance and quality of service. Analysing the survey results, however, suggests several factors contribute to the slowing down of the data retrieval process.

Perhaps the most significant is the number of different systems employees must use to access the information they need. 18% of respondents said they had log into 20 or more systems daily, and while each login may only mean a moment or two inputting security details, application opening times can easily add another few minutes to the process – especially on older, legacy hardware running outdated applications.

This is made worse the more searches employees have to conduct; 38% reported they make 16 or more individual searches for information in the course of a working day, with each of those searches taking up to 5 minutes at a time for 29% of them.

The effect of each of these factors alone – the number of systems, the number of searches and the average length of each search – can significantly increase the time it takes to retrieve data. Their cumulative effect, however, is much more significant.

Using the figures above, an employee making 16 searches per day, taking 5 minutes each time, will spend 6.6 hours each week waiting for search results to be returned. Even more if those searches are spread across several different systems.

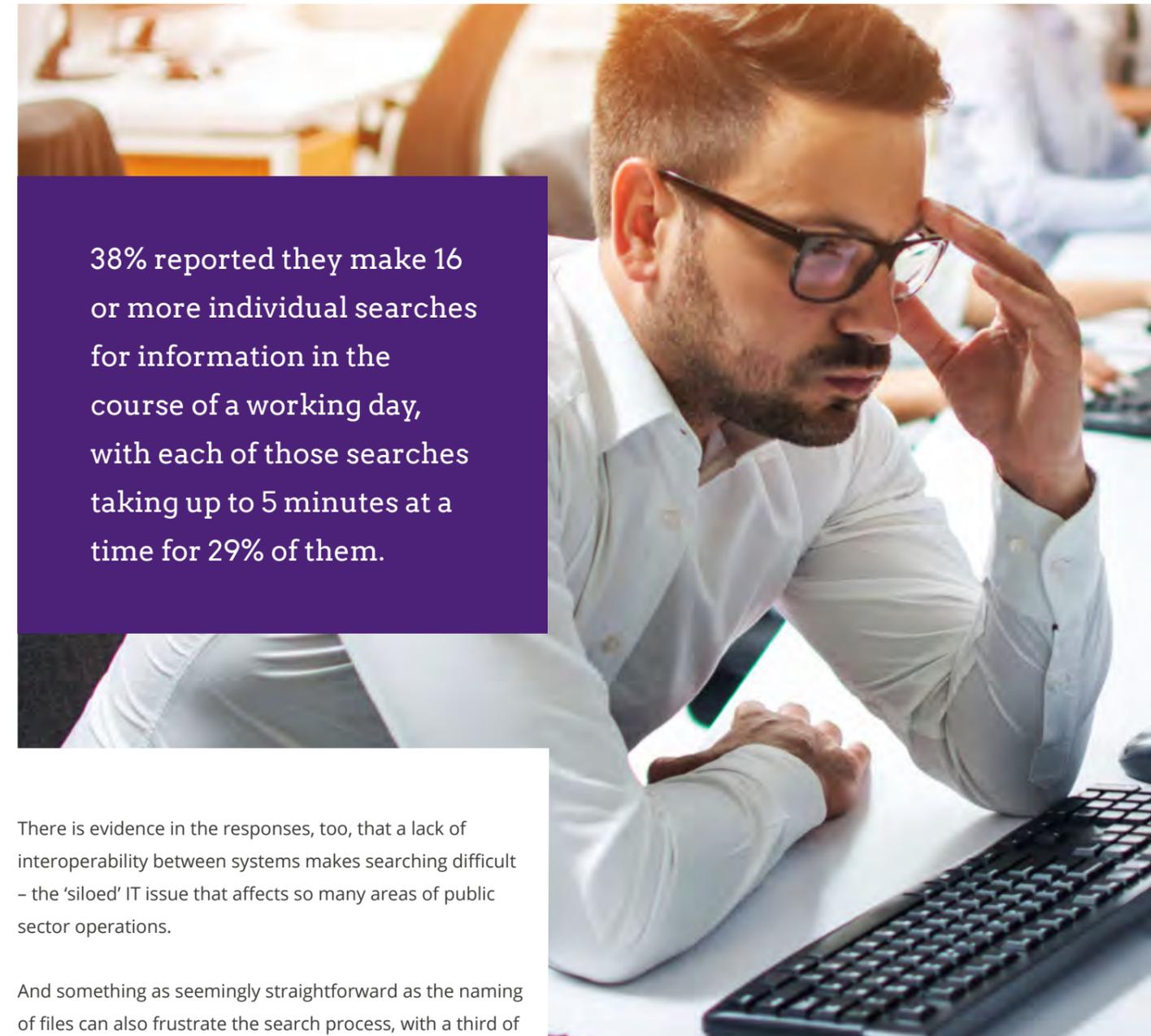
There is a link between usability of systems, the accessibility of information and the perceived quality of that information.

Information is hard to find because it is dispersed across multiple systems. This has implications because it takes time to log in to each of those systems, as outlined above. But there are also questions of usability that further impact on the availability of information.

Different systems, inevitably, have different search protocols, interfaces and tools, all of which need to be remembered and practiced. We all know working regularly in one application breeds familiarity with its features and shortcuts. Switching between multiple applications, on the other hand, can compromise how well we work on any particular one, and the quality of the results we achieve.

Without a single view of the information stored across all their systems, data customers in the public service can be compromised in the same way.

Respondents also reported that quality of the application interfaces they are using is a factor in how easily and thoroughly they can search. 26% say their information search facility is 'not at all intuitive', while 35% feel they 'lack the right tools to find information efficiently'.



38% reported they make 16 or more individual searches for information in the course of a working day, with each of those searches taking up to 5 minutes at a time for 29% of them.

There is evidence in the responses, too, that a lack of interoperability between systems makes searching difficult – the 'siloed' IT issue that affects so many areas of public sector operations.

And something as seemingly straightforward as the naming of files can also frustrate the search process, with a third of employees agreeing that while they know the information they are looking for exists, they don't know where to find it.

Not only do all these usability issues affect how easy is to carry out a search. There is also evidence that the harder and more time consuming a search is, the less trust employees place in the results they get back. While this could be because they feel it is incomplete or flawed, without further research it is difficult to draw more definite conclusions beyond noting it is something 30% of respondents acknowledge.

The clear need is for federated search processes that consolidate search results from any number of data sources and present them to users in a single view. A key feature of modern ECM platforms, federated search brings ease, speed and relevance to information searches. It provides a way to overcome the many problems presented by siloed information sources, and a means to make searches more efficient across disparate platforms it would be impractical or too expensive to replace.

BYOD is making inroads in the public sector, but to a relatively limited extent



Bring Your Own Device, while well established in the private sector, has made much less of an inroad in the public sector workplace.

As with most new tech, this can be attributed to a historical 'late adopter' mindset among public sector IT decision makers, along with a more cautious approach to security and data governance.

Acting in opposition to this, however, is a realisation that personal mobile devices have a critical part to play in a public sector that is more responsive, more engaged with citizens and more open to modern working practices.

That realisation was driven home by the lockdown, when the majority of public sector employees were required to work from home. Without access to networked, enterprise standard IT, many relied on mobile devices to manage workflow processes as best they could. Had these devices been integrated into enterprise content management systems, it would have allowed them to handle tasks remotely with much more ease, while still maintaining centralised governance and security standards.

As trends in post-pandemic planning become clearer, it seems likely more and more public sector IT decision makers will look to include BYOD in wider enterprise architecture to increase flexibility and accommodate 'new normal' working practices.

The survey responses would seem to indicate there is a measured and growing acceptance of BYOD where it can help employees manage information more efficiently. So, although BYOD is still not allowed in nearly 40% of cases, it is regularly used elsewhere to manage and store information 'off site' – most commonly as emails and email attachments.

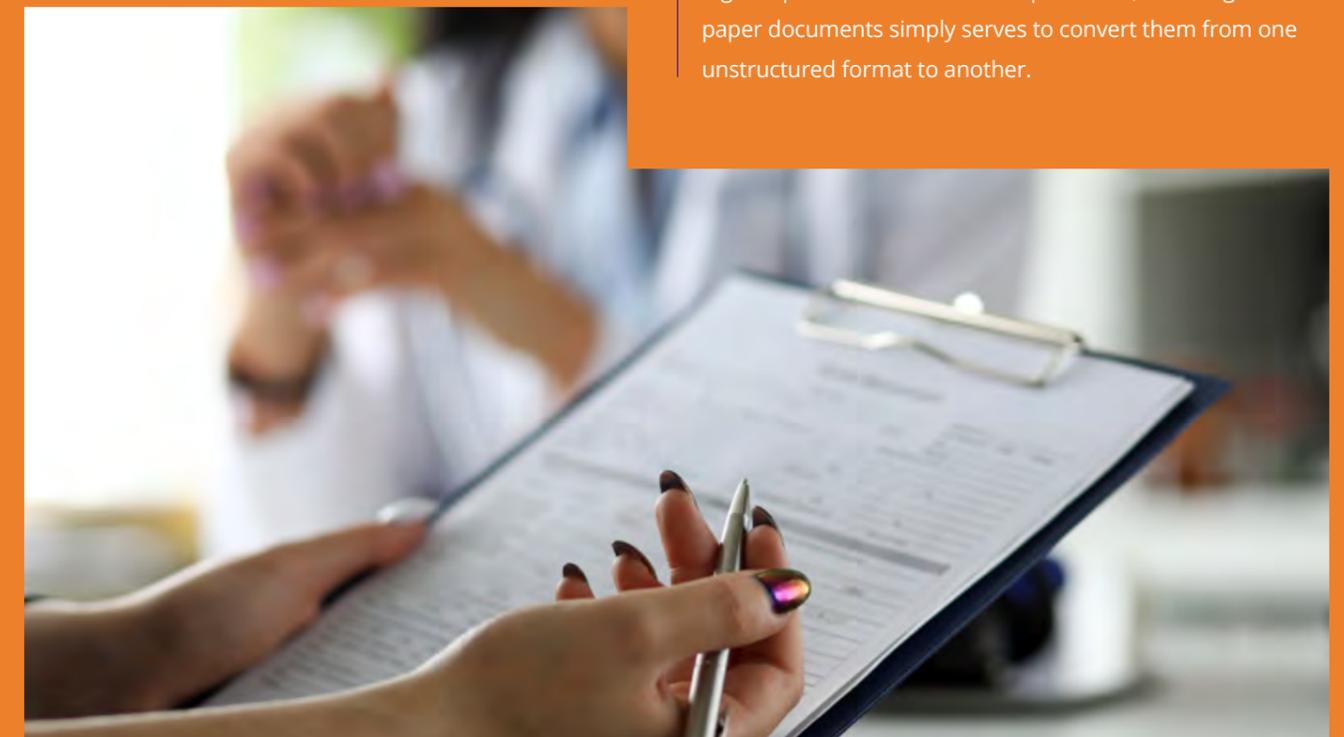
While BYOD may sometimes expose organisations to an increased security risk – especially where shadow IT becomes overlaid on central IT systems – this appears to be mitigated by high levels of awareness around compliance issues.

77% felt they were fully aware of GDPR and its implications and nearly half are satisfied they have been fully briefed on their own GDPR responsibilities regarding the use of BYOD and other information management platforms. Reflecting, perhaps, a public sector that is largely striking the right balance between the risks and rewards of non-standard technology in the workplace.

Paper is still widely used for primary record keeping.

Perhaps the most surprising fact to emerge from the survey results is the extent to which paper records are still critical for so many in the public sector.

60% consider themselves reliant on paper to some extent. A figure that is astonishingly high given the effort over the last decade and a half to shift information management away from paper and into digital formats and systems.



In the NHS especially there has been a whole series of initiatives, starting with a call for a paperless service in 2013 and progressing right through to the current long-term plan, which sets even higher targets for digital data management.

Despite this, 94% of NHS Trusts were still using paper patient records in some capacity as recently as 2018¹

Without further analysis of the survey results, it is difficult to judge what portion of the 17% who rely on paper 'to a great extent' represent the NHS workforce. Nevertheless, it is a clear signal that there is still ground to make up on the journey towards a fully digital public sector.

One encouraging sign, however, is that 71% of respondents said they convert paper records into digital files, either by scanning them or using OCR technology to extract their content. Less clear is exactly how many organisations are investing in the ECM systems that can analyse and extract information from these files as part of a fully digital operation. Without these processes, scanning paper documents simply serves to convert them from one unstructured format to another.

¹ NHS Data Security – Protecting Patient Records. Parliament Street, August 2018

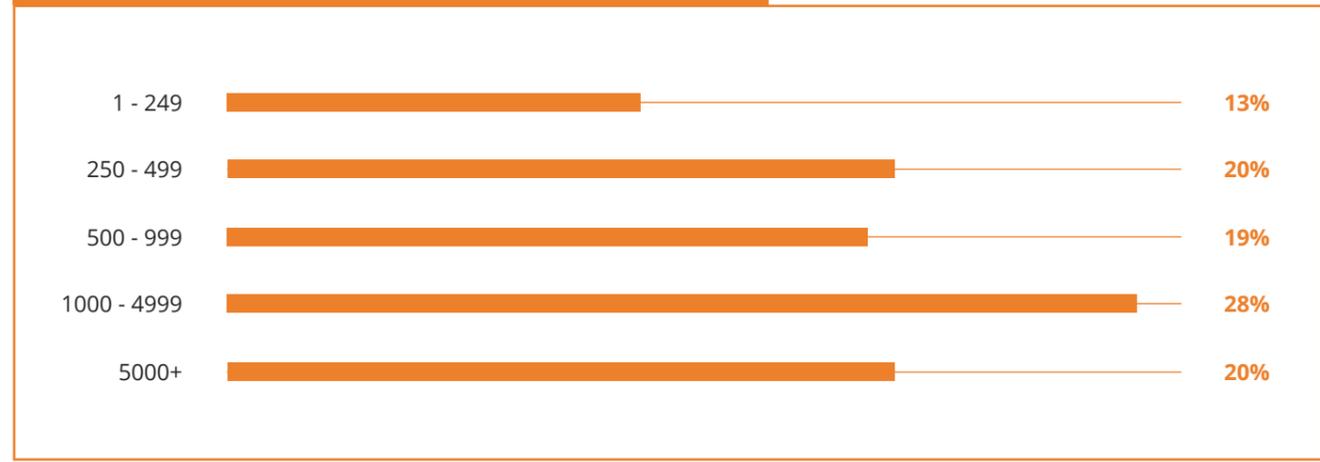
Key Findings

The Information in Transition survey was commissioned jointly by SynApps and GovNewsDirect to examine public sector information management processes and explore the technical and cultural factors affecting workers' ability to access information.

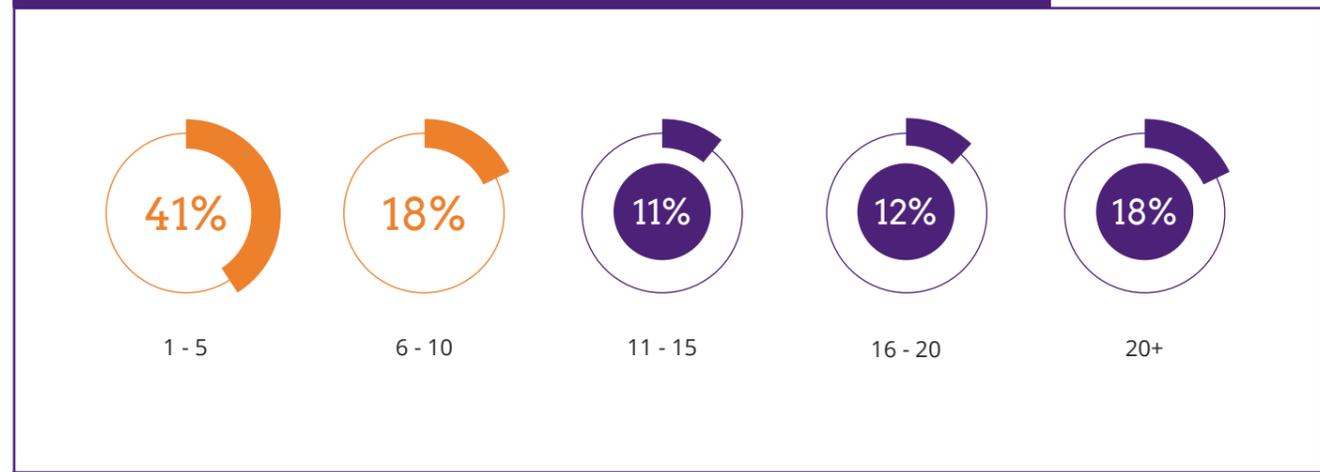
It was conducted between 14th February 2020 and 13th March 2020, and compiled from the responses of 427 public sector employees, 68% of who work in Central Government, Local Government and the NHS or associated healthcare services.



How many employees work within the organisation?



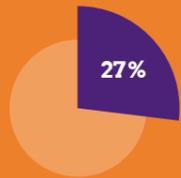
How many different systems do you have to log into to access information?



41% said they regularly logged in to 11 or more systems daily. 18% were required to log in to 20 or more.

How often do you search for information across your systems per day?

Extensively (20+ times)



Considerable (16-20 times)



Moderately (11-15 times)



Fractionally (6-10 times)



Very Little (1-5 times)



Those who had to carry out searches 16 or more times each day constituted over a third of respondents (38%), with 27% of all those questioned saying they searched more than 20 times per day.

When asked to evaluate ease of access to information, almost three quarters told us they considered it only 'Partially' easy, or not easy at all.

Do you find it easy to access information when you need it?



Yes

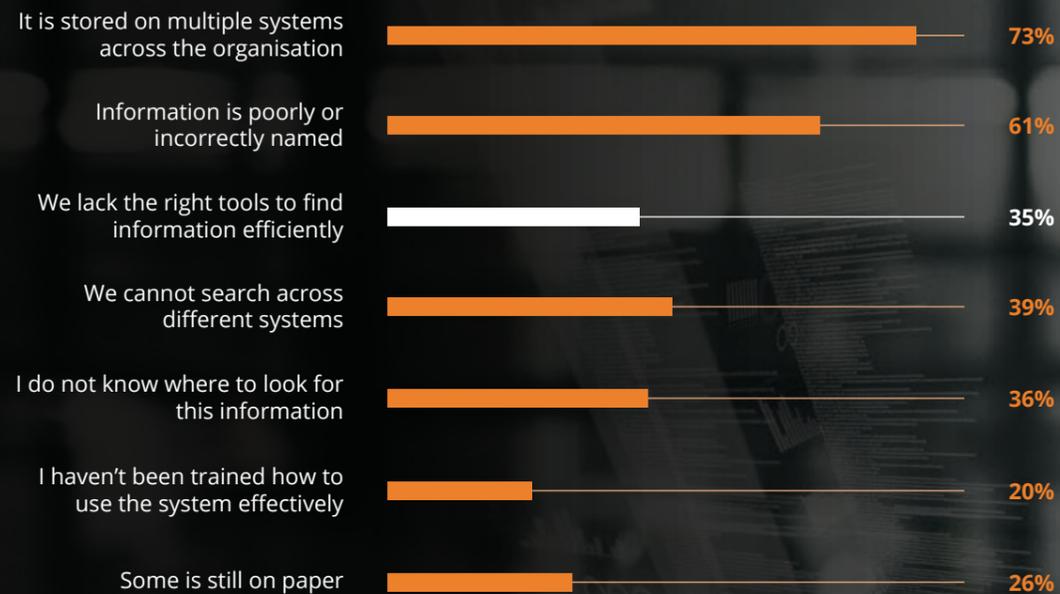


Partially



No

When you find information hard to find, why do you think this is?



An overwhelming 73% – almost three quarters of those who responded – cited the use of multiple systems across their organisation as the single biggest reason they found it difficult to access information.

The second biggest barrier to effective search was considered to be poorly or incorrectly named files and directories (61%). One third cited a lack of suitable tools, and 39% said an inability to search across different systems also held them back.

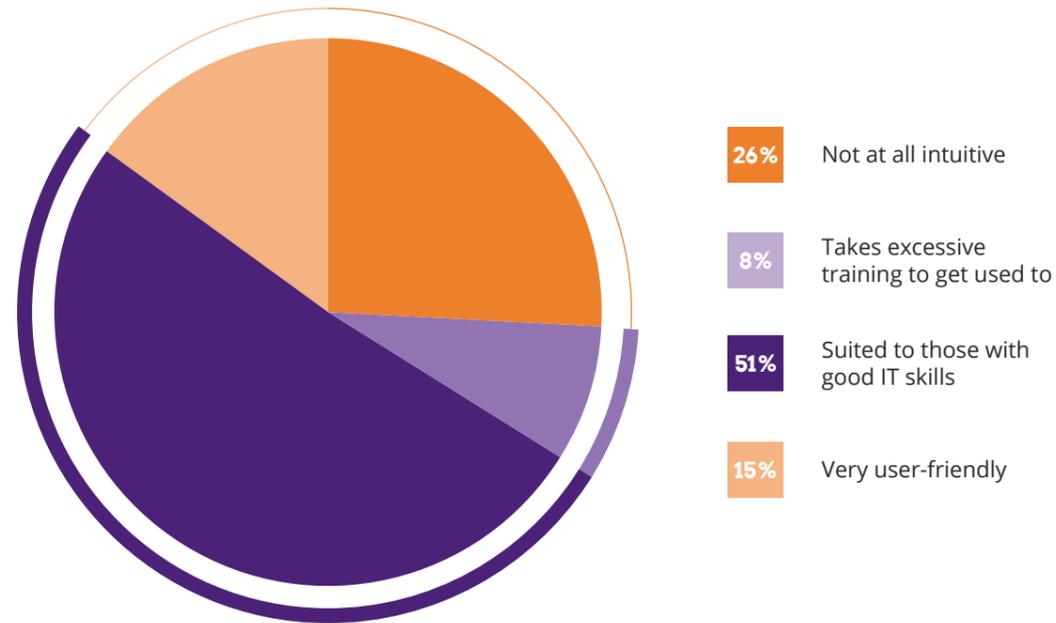
36% said they did not know where to look for information, while inadequate training and reliance on paper records were both cited in over 20% of cases.

When looking for information in your systems & applications, it takes you on average:

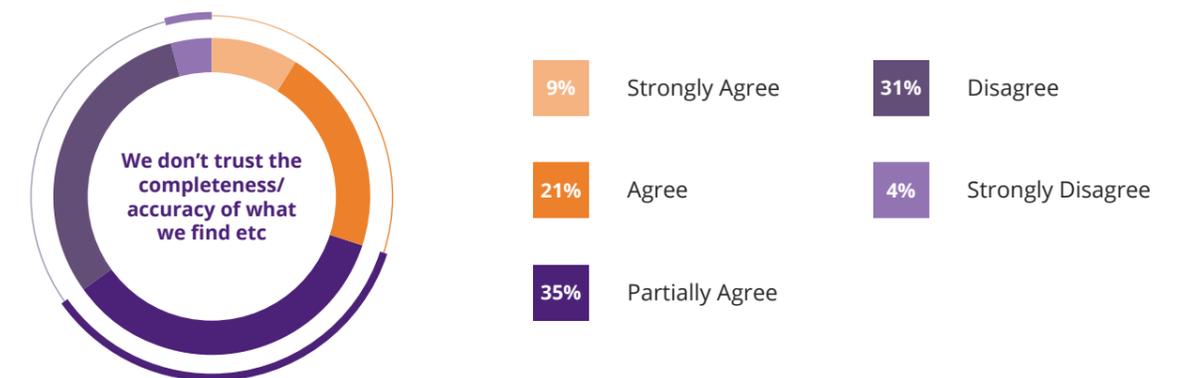
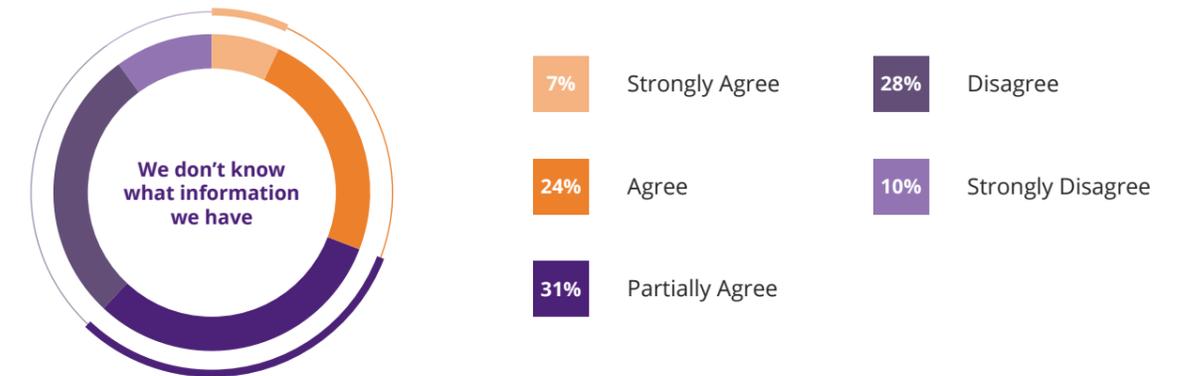
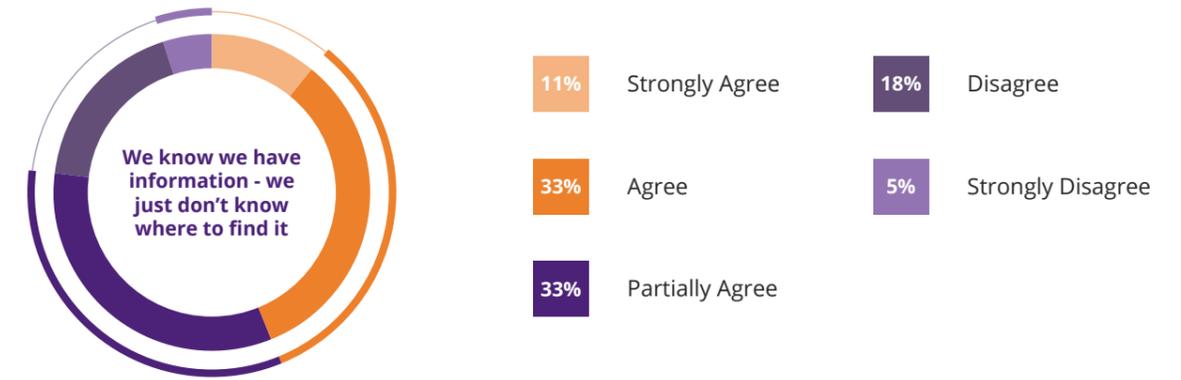


29% of respondents said it took them up to 5 minutes to access information on a regular basis, while 18% were regularly looking for information for up to 10 minutes.

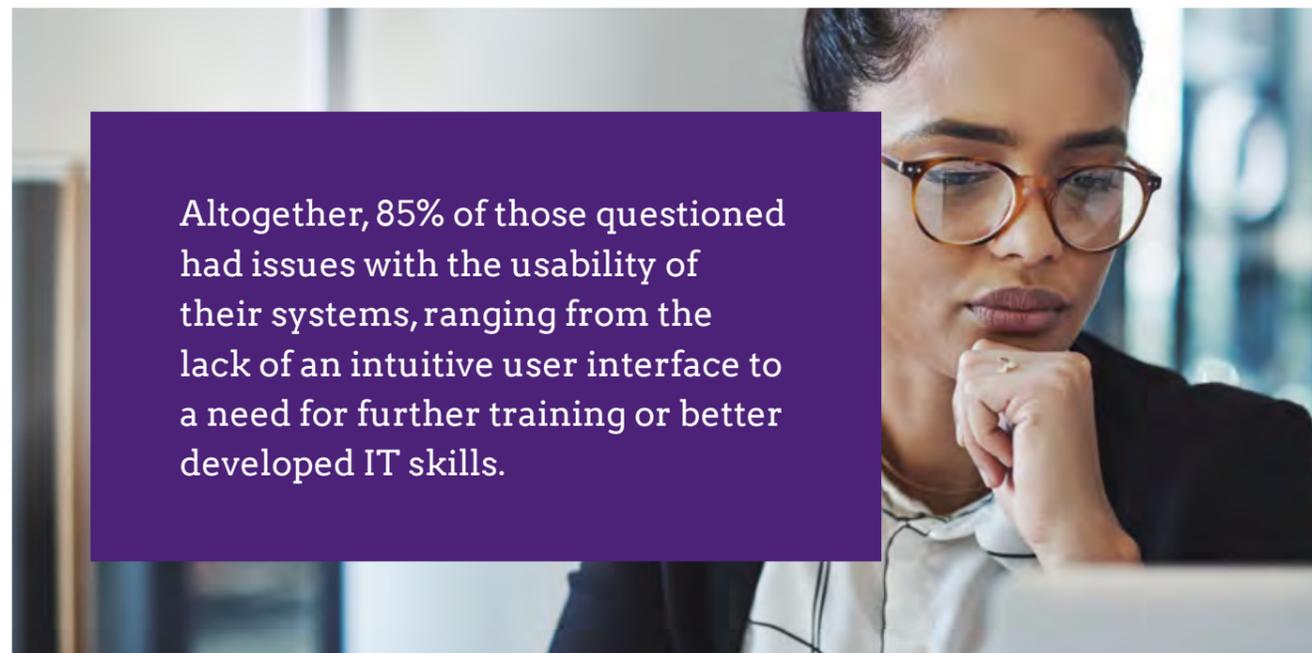
How user-friendly/intuitive would you describe your information search facility?



To what extent do you agree with the following statements?



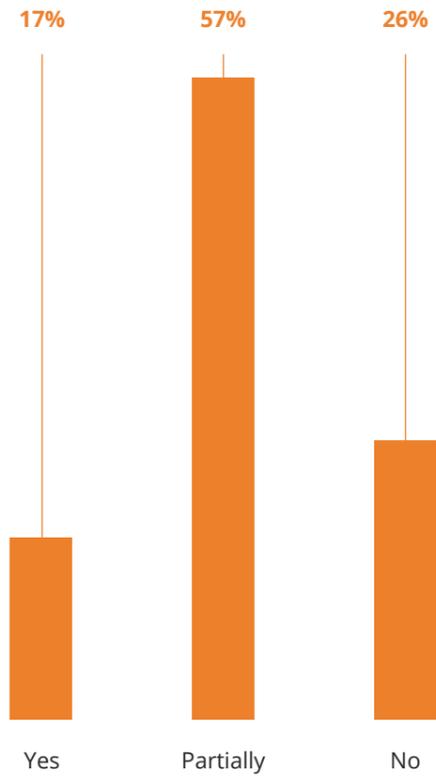
A third of all employees replying to the survey agreed with the statement 'We know we have information - we just don't know where to find it.' 21% also agreed that they couldn't trust the completeness or accuracy of the information they found.



Altogether, 85% of those questioned had issues with the usability of their systems, ranging from the lack of an intuitive user interface to a need for further training or better developed IT skills.

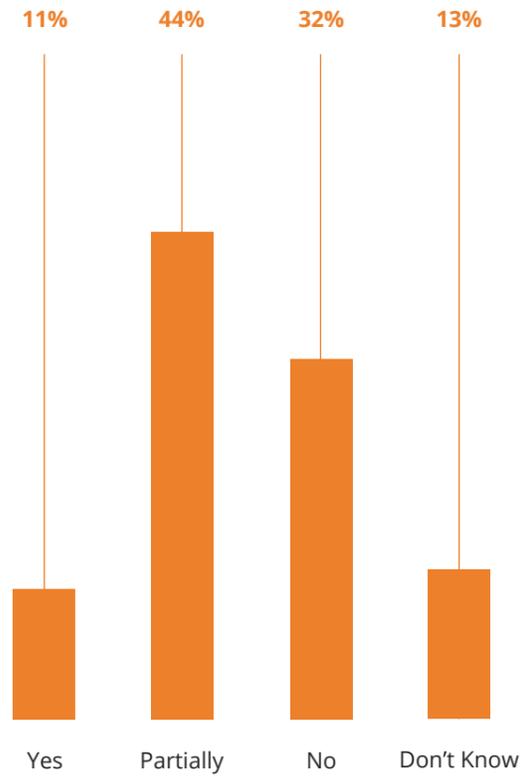
Are your organisation's systems integrated?

Integration refers to connecting applications so that data from one system can be accessed by the other one.



Are your organisation's systems interoperable?

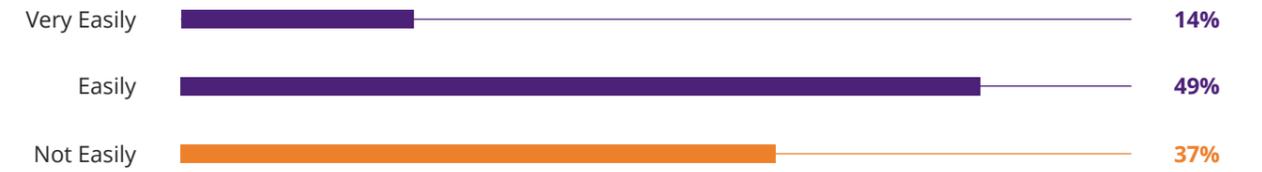
Interoperability refers to the collaboration ability of systems across organisations, geographies, professionals and citizens.



How easily can you share information externally, i.e. with other organisations, public bodies and/or the public?

8%
Very Easily

How easily can you share information internally with other departments and colleagues?

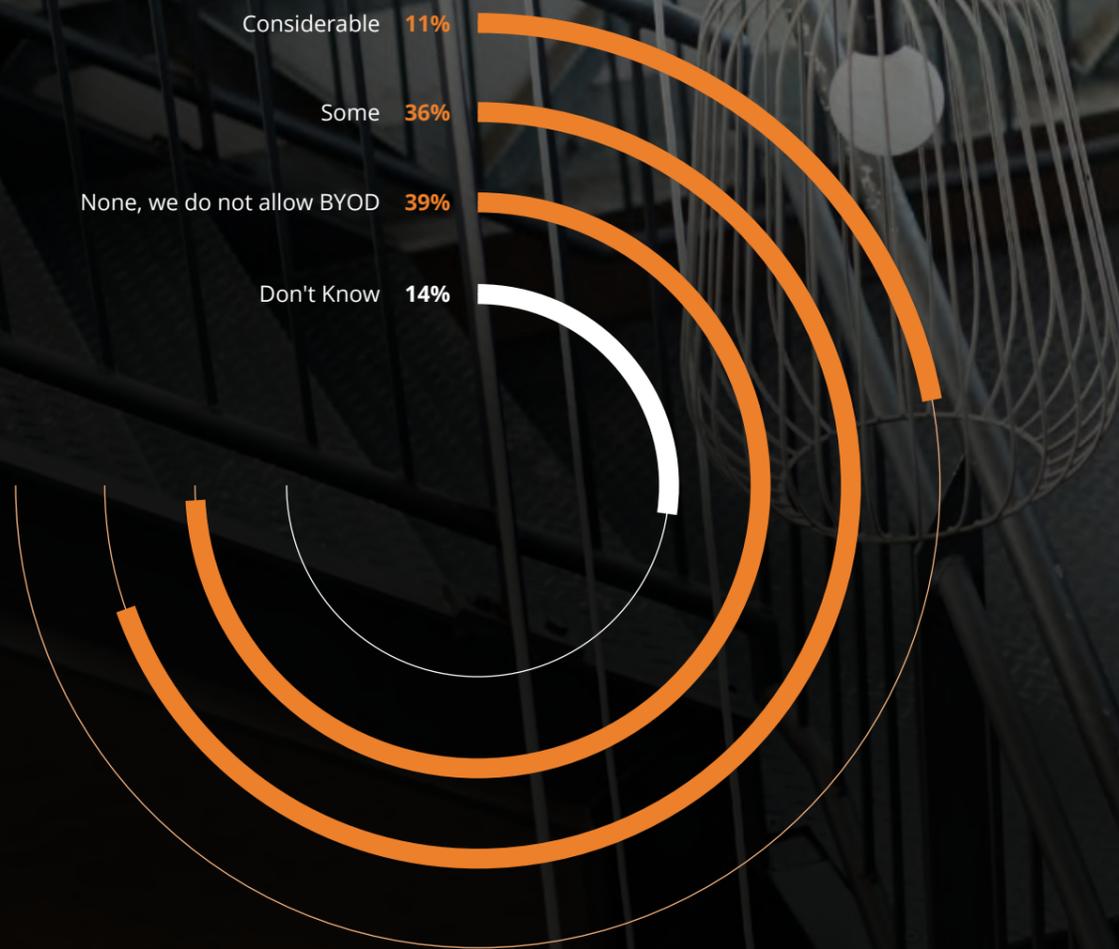


63% stated they could share information between colleagues and other departments easily. However, when it came to sharing information with other organisations elsewhere in the public sector, or with the public, over half (55%) said they did not find it easy.

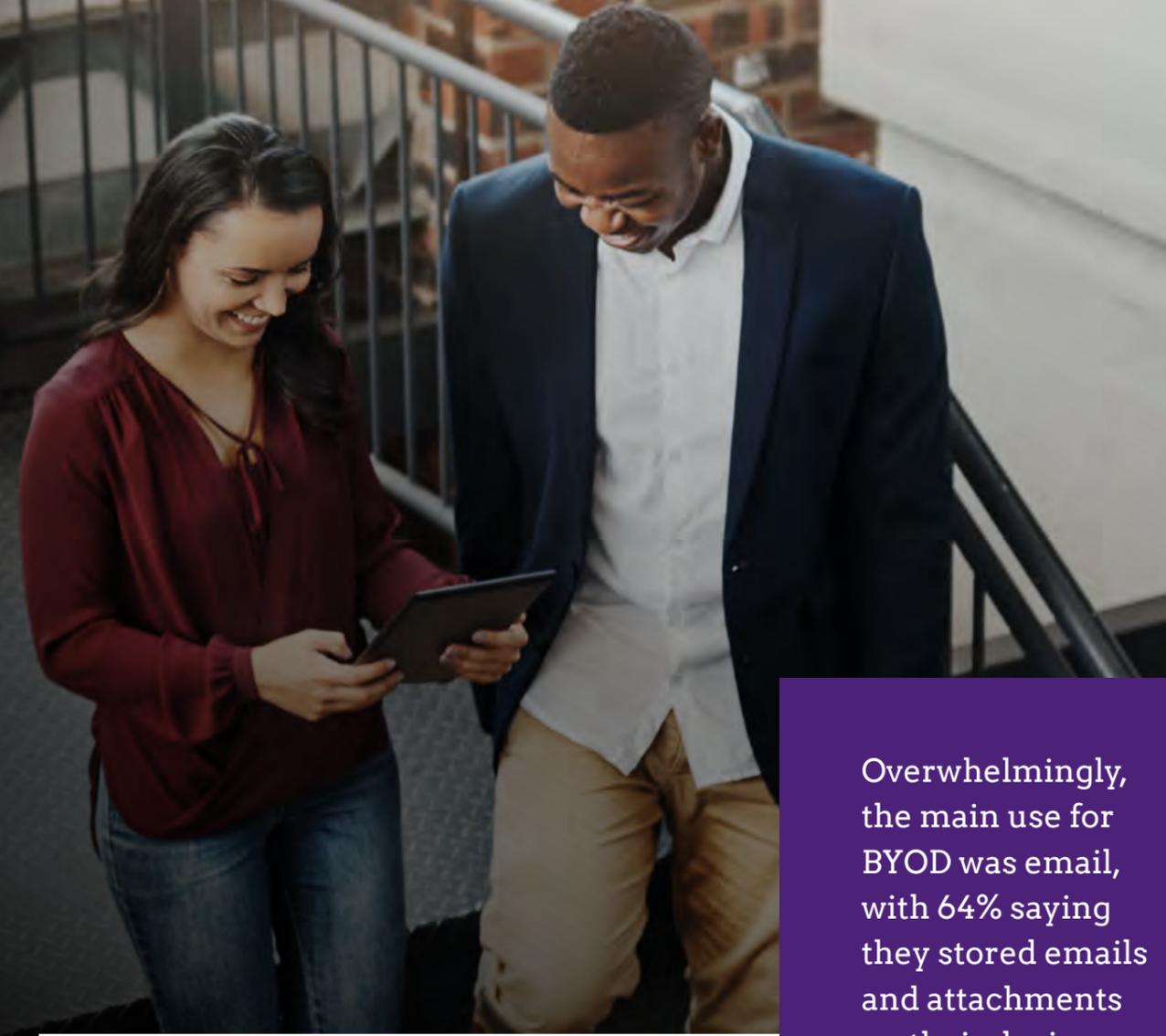
37%
Easily

55%
Not easily

How much of your content/information is stored on personal devices (BYOD)?



In total, 47% of respondents said 'some' or 'considerable' amounts of data were held on personal devices, while 39% confirmed that BYOD was not allowed in the workplace.



Overwhelmingly, the main use for BYOD was email, with 64% saying they stored emails and attachments on their devices.

Which types of information ends up on personal devices?



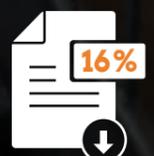
Structured Data (i.e. spreadsheets)



Emails



Scans



PDFs

Thinking about information with regard to GDPR, do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

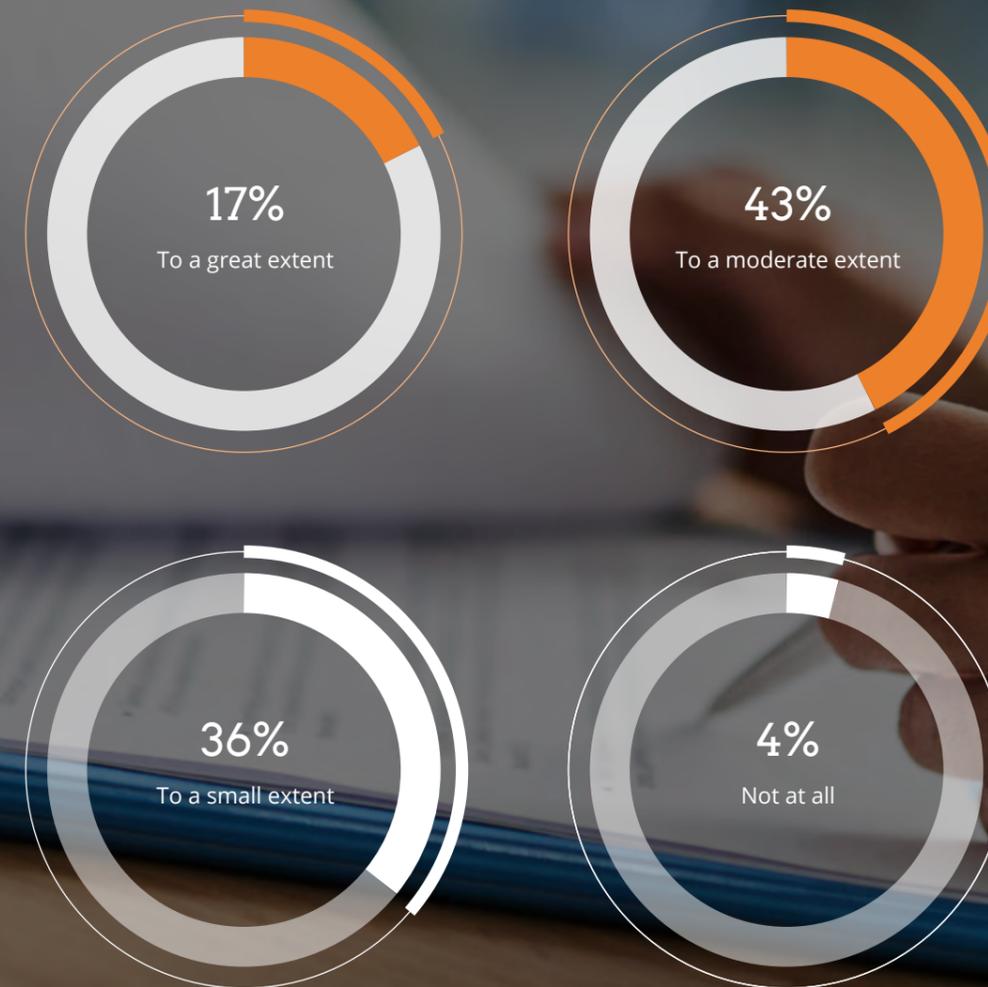


What risks do you associate with your current information management platforms?



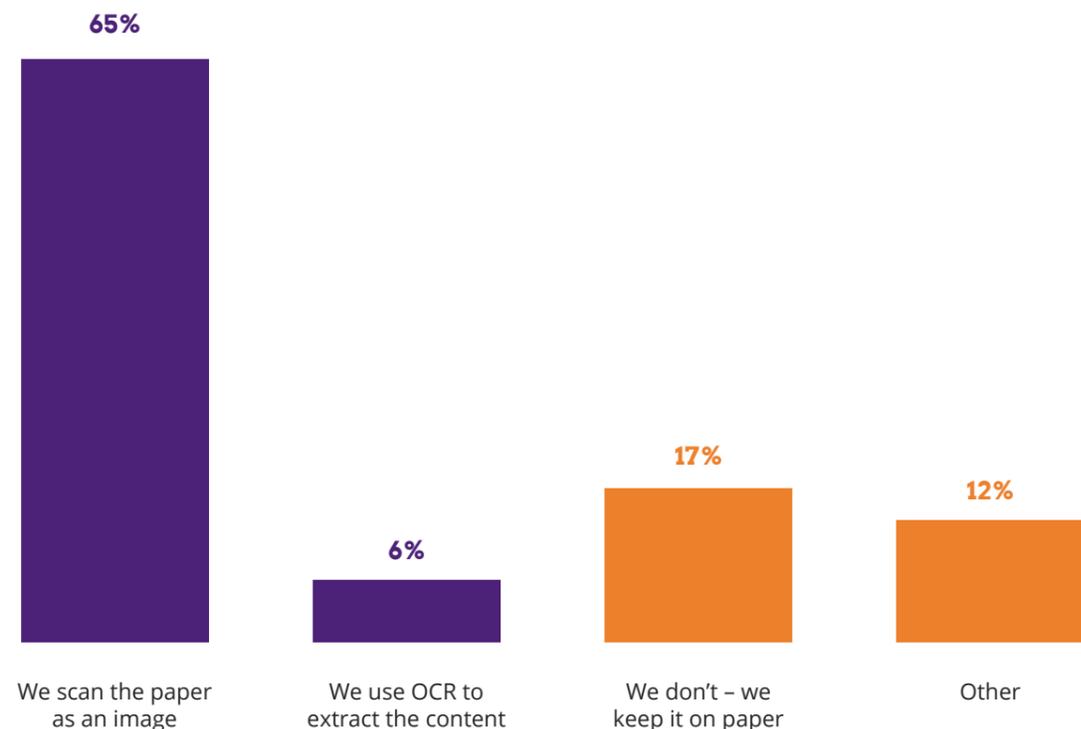
Compliance was identified as the most significant risk by two thirds of respondents, with security breaches a concern for 49% and GDPR issues considered a risk by 47%.

To what extent is paper still used in your organisation?

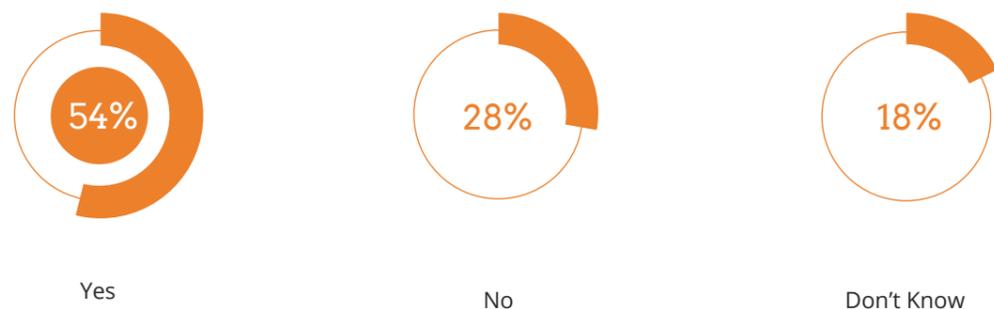


60% of those who filled in the survey said paper records were used to a 'moderate' or 'great' extent in their workplace. 71% converted this information into a digital format, either by scanning or using OCR applications to extract content.

How do you convert paper-based information to digital?



Are you able to validate documents/information/content?

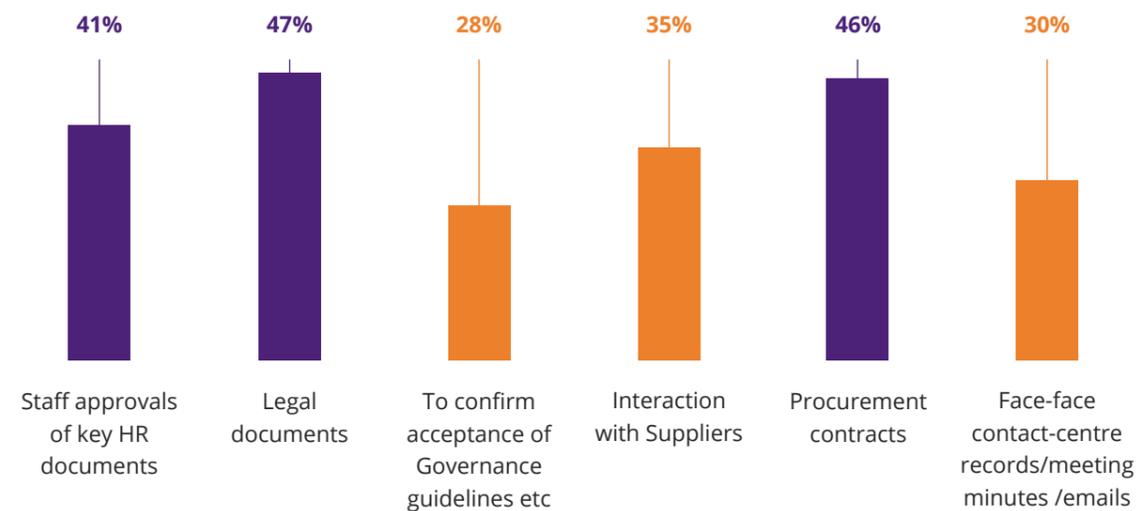


What requirement is there for legally binding digital signatures/eSignatures within your organisation?

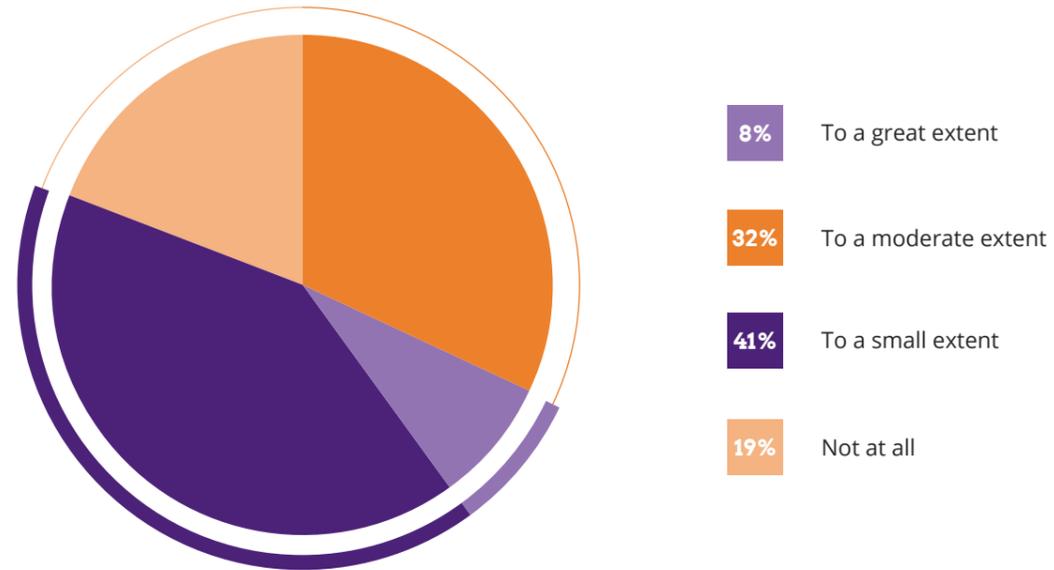


45% said there was either a 'Significant' or 'Moderate' need in their organisation. Those that could identify departments using legally binding signatures cited Legal (47%), Procurement (46%) and HR as the most common.

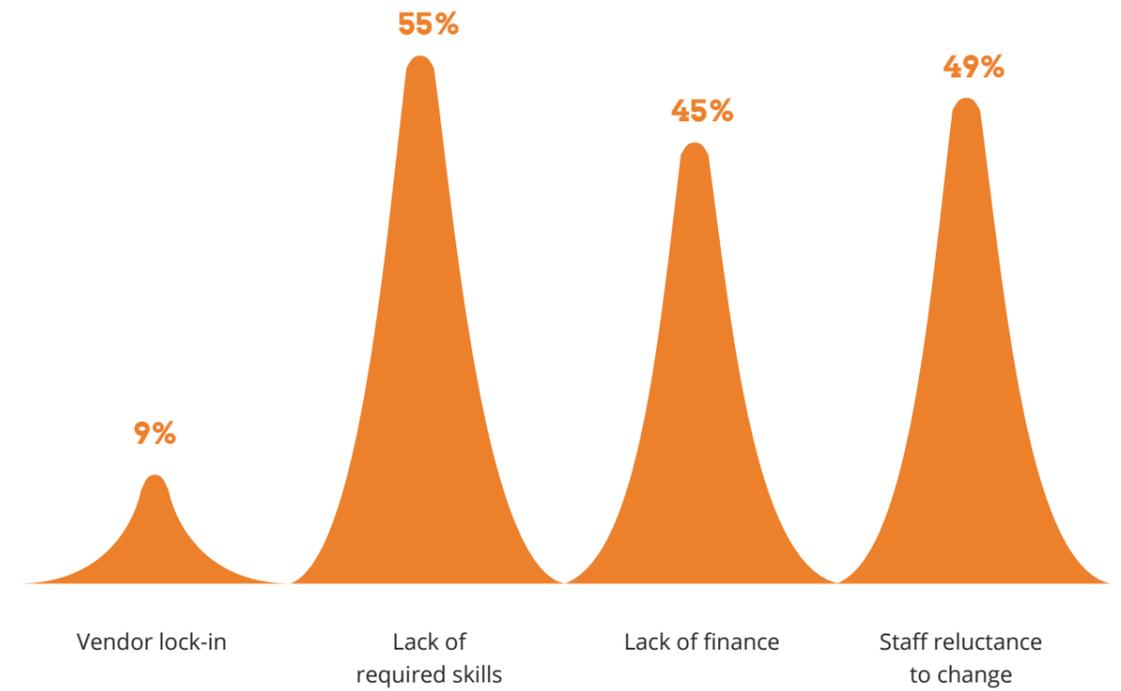
If you use legally binding digital signatures/eSignatures, please tick the areas you use them in:



To what extent has your organisation adopted Workflow/Process Automation technologies?



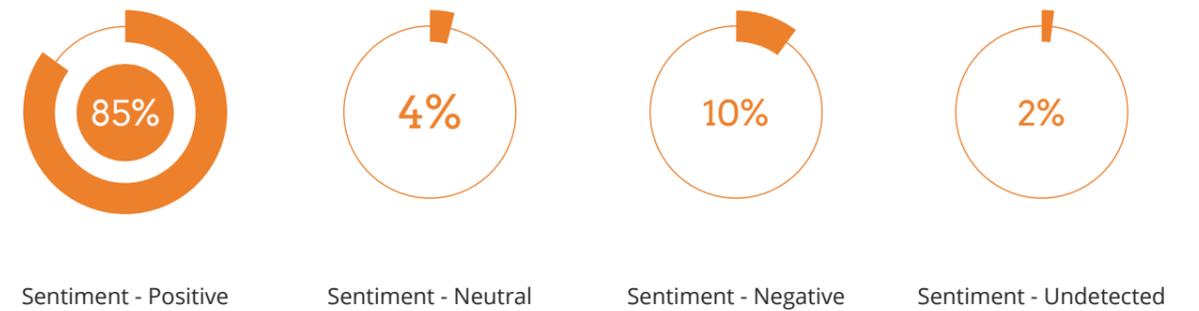
What are your key challenges to smarter working?



How well do you feel your organisation's information management platforms support smarter working?



What is the single biggest reason to keep you motivated and working in the Public Sector now and in the future?



The SynApps View

James Paton
Chief Executive Officer



Managing Cultural and Digital Change – In that Order

The results of our most recent survey provide an invaluable insight on the state of play for Enterprise Content Management in 2020, almost two decades into the public sectors’ digital transformation journey.

What it shows is a sector facing and broadly negotiating its day-to-day challenges successfully, despite the ‘usual suspects’ of outdated or over-complex information management systems, siloed data repositories, poor record keeping and concerns about security and data governance.

It would be easy to suggest wide scale adoption of today’s powerful ECM solutions could wave a magic wand over all these problems and make them disappear. In part, it would. But not without a corresponding process of cultural change that can be every bit as complex – if not more so – than any large scale IT transformation project.

What we mustn’t lose sight of is that many of the inhibitors to efficient data retrieval cited by survey respondents – too many systems, slow, inefficient processes, lack of interoperability – nevertheless represent familiar routines that shape the working day.

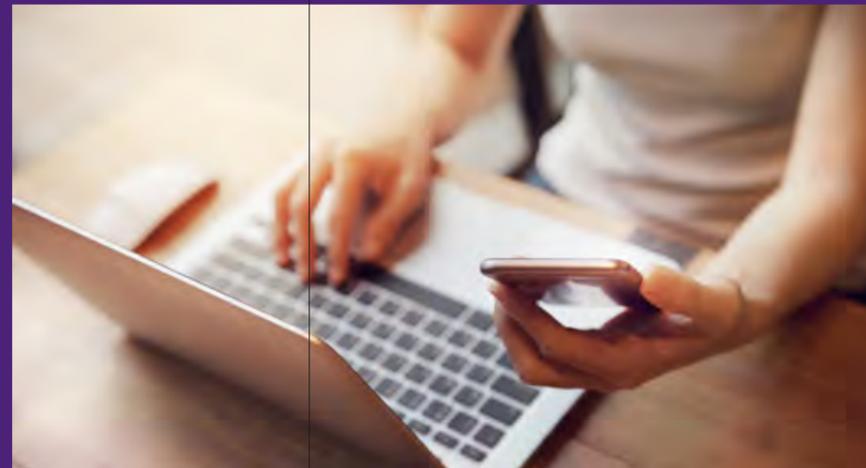
Yes, an ECM solution that automates document management and streamlines information retrieval from a structured repository brings enormous cost and efficiency

benefits. But before that can happen, those whose working lives are going to be directly affected by it must be brought along on the journey.

Even today, users can often be sceptical or even scared of new technology. “If the Council is paying me to scan and file benefit applications”, goes the thinking “what happens to me when that process becomes automated?” And even if there isn’t a perceived threat to jobs, the change in routine and the requirement to learn new systems and procedures can be equally unsettling.

For all these reasons, training, familiarisation and onboarding need to be an integral part of introducing any new ECM system. And they need to be introduced as close as possible to the actual point of change, so that employees have an opportunity to exercise their new knowledge before it joins all the other half remembered coaching sessions and training courses at the back of their mind.

The alternative is for any gains in process efficiency to be wiped out by that most fundamental human instinct to take the path of least resistance; if a workaround for a scanning or software problem gets results this time without having to consult the manual or raise a ticket with IT, then where’s the incentive to do it properly next time?



One of the most telling survey responses was the 20% that stated they struggled to find information because they lacked sufficient training in their existing systems. If the public sector is to get the maximum benefit from its investment in ECM, that training must be part of a process that recognises it’s not just about new technology – it’s about culturally embedding new technology so it becomes part of the everyday working experience.

BPM and the Paperless Information Environment

It says a lot about certain parts of the public sector that paper is still regarded as the most reliable method of managing and communicating data.

This can be understood in the case of organisations that receive large volumes of paper mail or otherwise take charge of paper-based records as a matter of course. Medical consent forms. Change of address details. Social care contract renewals... the common administration tasks that public sector organisations have to process tens of thousands of times each day.

Even today, users can often be sceptical or even scared of new technology. “If the Council is paying me to scan and file benefit applications”, goes the thinking “what happens to me when that process becomes automated?”

But when paper is at the heart of those processes, mistakes happen. Paper in transit, after all, represents many times the security and compliance risk than having that same data digitised and managed within a structured repository. The regular newspaper stories detailing how yet another file of confidential documents has been found on a train or the back seat of a taxi are testament to that.

In a great many cases, that paper will be scanned and converted directly into digital files to be archived in data repositories – often as part of a legal obligation to retain

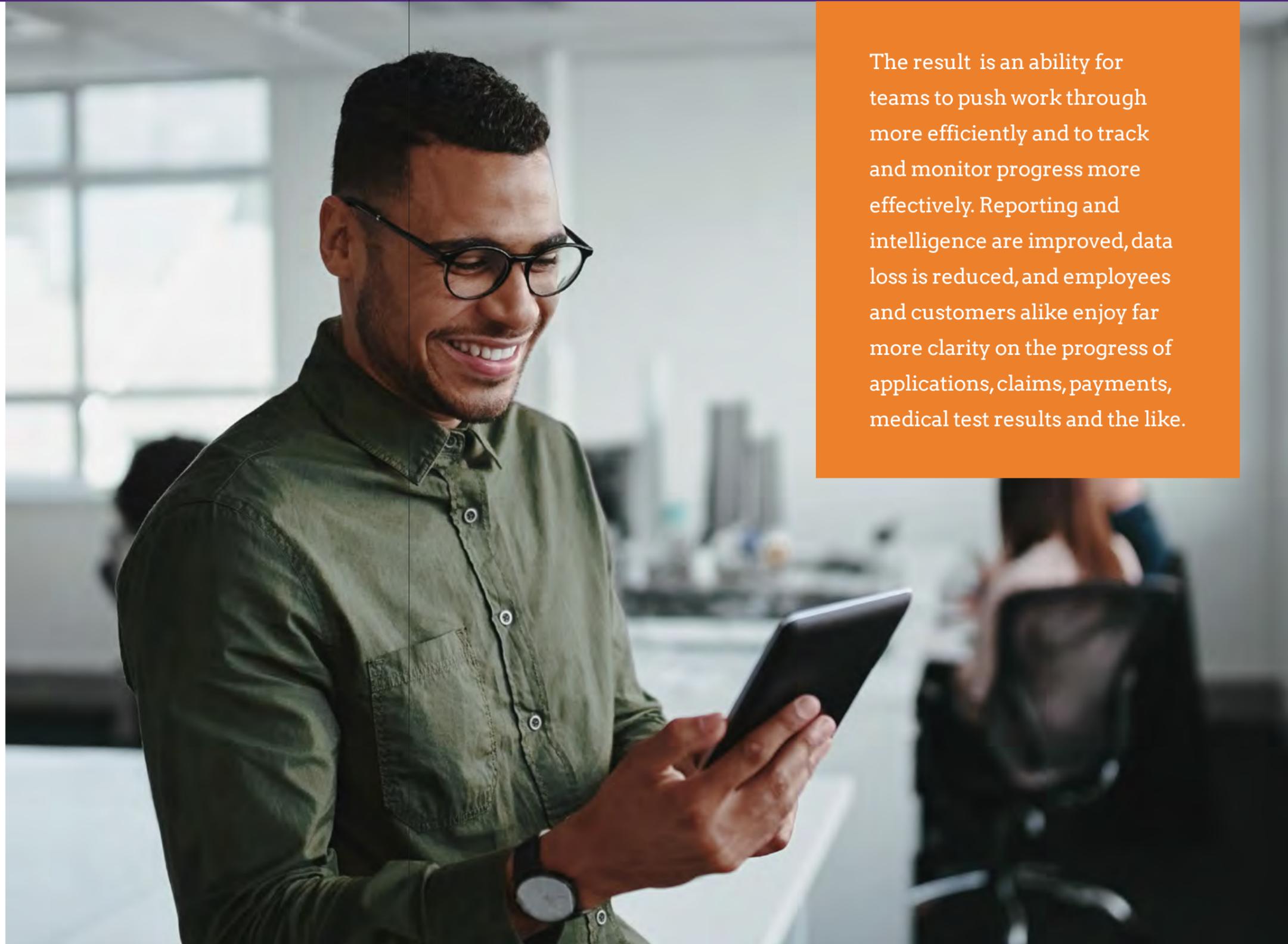
certain types of records for a mandated period of time. But it's only when they are integrated into a records ecosystem that accommodates all forms of structured and unstructured data that scanned documents realise their full value in a wider Business Process Management (BPM) system.

In a fully digital operation, services such as benefits claims can be progressed using records of all kinds, from scanned paper and website forms to email or SMS messages—often within a single claim.

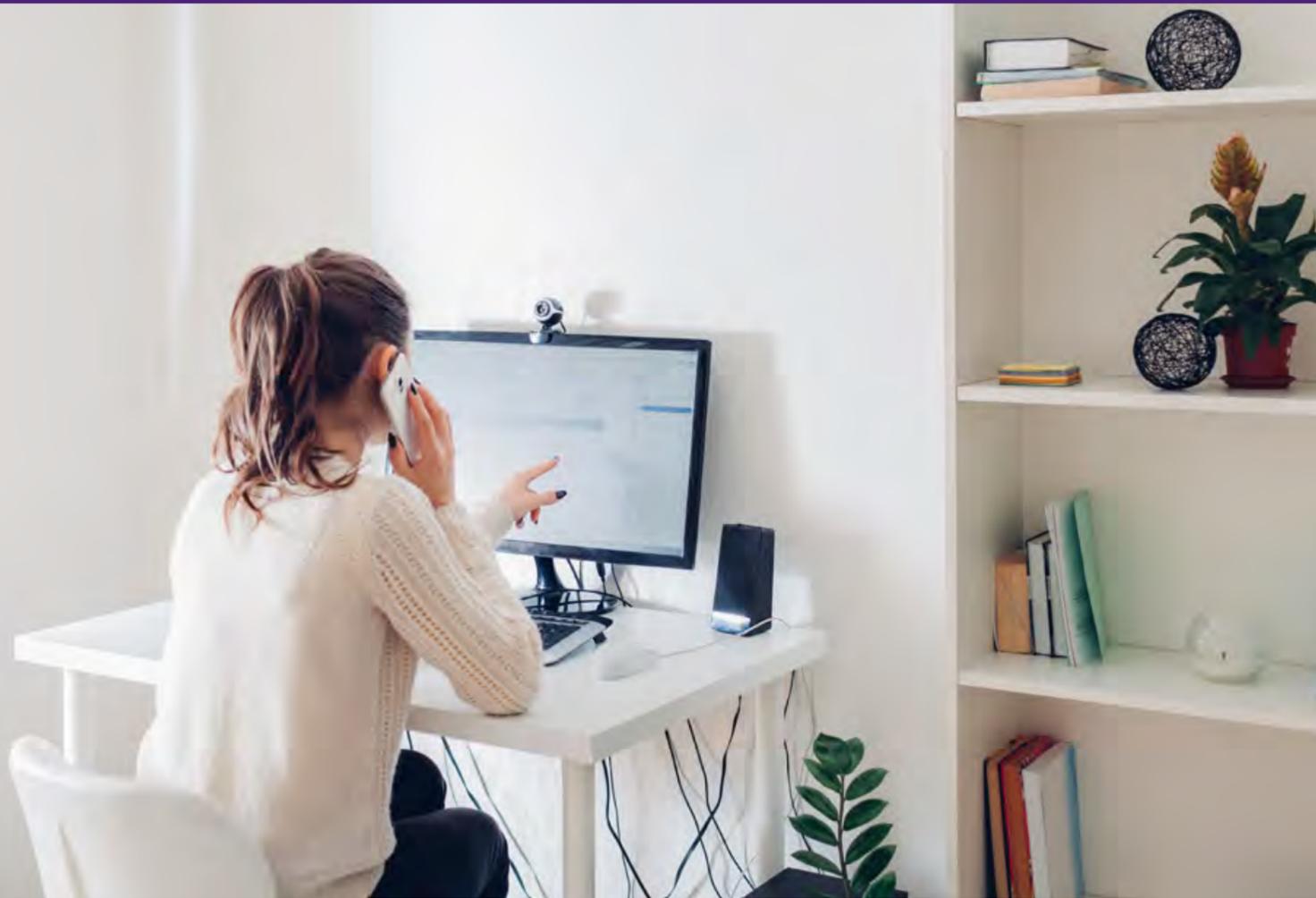
Benefits officers are able to track claims progress in a single, intuitive user interface, taking advantage of automated workflow processes and effective reporting tools that in turn link with council revenue and benefits solutions.

Likewise, in healthcare administration, BPM can help increase patient engagement by providing the means to book appointments via an app or online portal which integrates with NHS Trust ECM systems. As well as automating appointment handling processes, this has the added advantage of significantly reducing the number of missed appointments.

Adopting a coherent BPM strategy, aided by enterprise-standard document management and collaboration tools, allows organisations to digitise and manage the data held in paper documents and integrate it into their overall information management systems.



The result is an ability for teams to push work through more efficiently and to track and monitor progress more effectively. Reporting and intelligence are improved, data loss is reduced, and employees and customers alike enjoy far more clarity on the progress of applications, claims, payments, medical test results and the like.



As an aside to the benefits of adopting a paper free approach to information management in public sector offices, mention has to be made of the vital role paperless systems play in remote and homeworking.

Using paper as a primary information source for homeworkers is neither practical nor secure, especially when modern unified data and communications platforms allow access to central IT systems from practically anywhere. The lockdown of 2020 has already reset attitudes to remote and homeworking, with many organisations recognising the long-term advantages of a decentralised workforce in the shape of greater flexibility and fewer fixed overheads.

The use of paper in the post Coronavirus workplace, too, must come under a question. In a society now much more attuned to the dangers of a virus transmitted by touch, passing around paper files might be seen as an unnecessary risk. Consensus on exactly how long Coronavirus can survive on paper is difficult to find, but reducing a potential disease vector by adopting more paperless processes will surely be a priority for every responsible employer in future.

The BYOD Challenge

Contingent on creating a more flexible remote workforce, of course, is the technology to make it happen.

While many organisations have continuity plans for employees to work from home, most anticipate it will be for a relatively short time and in response to a localised event such as a fire or flood. Few take into account the effect of a worldwide shut down lasting several months.

As a result, most employees don't have enterprise standard IT in their own homes, meaning the fallback for short term remote working in a crisis, as we have seen, is the use of personal laptops and mobile devices.

Even in non-exceptional times, personal devices are being used more and more in today's public sector workplace, although nothing like on the scale that BYOD has been adopted in the private sector. Where they are an accepted part an organisation's working processes, however, it would be reassuring to know there are sufficient safeguards in place to guarantee the security of any data carried on them.

The critical issue, of course, is over the control of data. The overwhelming use of personal IT devices, according to our survey, is email. When information is sent in an email, and personal devices sync and download it, it becomes an immediate security risk – not to mention a compliance issue: GDPR states all data must be “processed in a manner that ensures appropriate security of the personal data, including protection against unauthorised or unlawful processing and against accidental loss, destruction or damage.”²

Quite simply, mobile phones, tablets and laptops get lost and stolen. Most have some kind of password protection, of course, but these are relatively easy to bypass for determined criminals. And while there are tools to wipe mobile devices remotely, they are not infallible and offer no guarantee that data has been deleted before it has been accessed by a third party.

The answer for organisations seeking the efficiencies of mobile IT without the risk is a 'light touch' integration of personal devices into ECM architecture, allowing data to be viewed but not replicated, moved or downloaded. That means using a workflow platform, usually cloud-based, that presents data in any browser or applications commonly used on PCs and mobile devices.

In this way, data never leaves the organisation – it is simply enabled for viewing remotely on devices connected to central IT systems, with carefully controlled security safeguards limiting who can see it. Yes, caches and cookies will retain a certain amount of browsing data, but even these can be set to delete so that the risk of information being exposed should a device be lost or stolen is minimal.

Beyond the considerations of security and mitigating data loss when access to information is granted on personal devices, the lesson of the Covid-19 lockdown is surely that personal IT must become more integrated with central systems to allow for more flexible and remote working.

Extending powerful federated search and collaboration tools to remote workers' PCs and mobile devices will help radically reshape the workplace of the future and move public sector organisations several steps on towards the objectives smarter working policies to deliver a mobile, accessible and collaborative work environment.

Looking to the Future

The direction of travel for all public sector organisations, regardless of their digital maturity, must be on refining and improving information search processes if they are to deliver the maximum possible benefit to their service users.

Those that are more advanced on their digital journey are already taking advantage of controlled repositories that allow better use of unstructured data via metadata search and retrieval, smarter indexing, and technology that is able to identify and extract key data even from flat scans.

Emerging technologies are already available from a number of cloud providers that accelerate and refine these processes still further by adding tools such as natural language processing and machine automation.

As a result, research efficiency is expanding to include files and documents outside structured data repositories – often those that have been lost or misplaced through being misnamed or simply because they haven't been needed. These capabilities address directly the problem faced by 44% of respondents, who agreed "We know we have the information – we just don't know where to find it."

Employing people to conduct a manual search for such documents is costly and inefficient, and diverts staff away from higher level, more fulfilling tasks. Applying a natural language search system, however, can massively improve results to a point where machine automation can do 80% of the work, with humans doing the remaining 20% to check and verify the results.

In time, that ratio will improve as further iterations of search software become more intelligent and organisations extract

even more value from the data they are paying to store - particularly data with a limited useful life that may otherwise end up taking up valuable server space.

Information is the new currency of public sector services, with Subject Access and Freedom of Information Requests just two areas in which increasing demand is being placed on search and retrieval workflows.

Organisations that don't adopt a coherent repository or structure will struggle, and even those that do can expect to go on something of a journey as they negotiate a steep learning curve for managers and machinery alike.

As workplaces and working relationships become more fluid, dynamic and adaptive, the need for digital operations supporting collaboration at distance becomes more and more important. In the same way, platforms that aggregate information quickly, efficiently and reliably wherever it's required are an absolute prerequisite for effective business process management.



The events of the last few months are proof that nothing is ever certain. But compared with ten years ago, when intelligent search and archiving was limited to little more than de-duplication, it seems the importance of ever more efficient information search and management systems as we adapt to the 'new normal' can only increase.



SynApps is an independent services and solutions company specialising in Enterprise Content Management (ECM) technologies.

Founded in 2003 by former Documentum services professionals, SynApps provides consultancy, implementation and support services for OpenText Documentum and Alfresco, and has authored a suite of content integration solutions, ConXApps, that allow businesses to quickly maximise their investment in ECM technologies.

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