The DAM Leadership Challenge – Transitioning from Project to Operations
Much is said and written about the various elements of successful DAM — metadata and nomenclature, product selection, running a DAM project, etc. — and appropriately so, since all are critical in their own right. But a question that’s being asked more and more is “what next?” It was quite a journey to get the DAM project defined, understood, approved and funded. The next adventure was choosing the best asset management product(s), with all the right stakeholders on board as that decision was made, but that major milestone too has passed. Now the asset management platform is being installed and integrated — perhaps even now being rolled out to users — and it is time to face the next big question... how should Digital Asset Management be lead and run for the organization? And run successfully.

Is there an executive leader dedicated to DAM? Should there be a specific DAM team? Where in the organizational structure would they report? What are the longer-term goals for asset management? How is DAM kept tightly aligned with the business (where the business finds itself today as well as where it is headed in the future)? How is “success” defined and (perhaps even more critical) how is that measured? And that bothersome thing called “governance!”

The question of where DAM reports in the organization can prove more vexing than expected — should it be treated as an IT application owned by the Corporate MIS team, a production platform run by, say, the Broadcast Operations group, or a business capability reporting, say, to the Chief Marketing Officer? Larger companies, especially, can find this question challenging if they have separated IT and production operations into distinct groups with individual value systems. DAM is an “application” that may not fall neatly into the value system of any one group — looking very IT-like in its technology platforms and infrastructure, while being deeply embedded in the content creation and delivery pipeline.

There certainly is a conventional technology infrastructure in there somewhere — storage, servers, databases, networks, etc. and sophisticated software too. All of which calls for the “classic IT” values of uptime, resiliency, planned maintenance, quality assurance, disaster recovery, etc., and establishment of the most effective service level agreements (with the user base and with the product vendors). Plus all of the longer range planning required to sustain these technology platforms as DAM grows, as its usage models change and the technologies themselves evolve and regenerate. All critical to success, though typically invisible when run smoothly.

However, DAM is very much part of the media ecosystem — creation, production, manipulation and distribution of content, of product, of marketing and advertising. Almost certainly more so than the company’s accounts payable application or even (gasp) the email system. It may be possible to tolerate a four hour outage in the accounting application but not for DAM where the cost of that outage is greater. DAM is very visible! Which means it needs to behave visibly like the production infrastructure, graphics workstations, edit suites, on-air operations, etc. It must be agile and respond quickly to changes in business needs. More subtly, this implies a tightness of relationship with users that the organization may not have found as critical for classic IT applications such as email or word processing — DAM leadership must know those users and how they are using the DAM tools so those tools are consistently meeting business needs. Often it is the production or marketing operations teams that live and breathe that value system, more than a back of house IT organization. IT leaders visiting places like broadcast operations centers for the first time can be surprised to find those facilities are not necessarily run with the same
formality or rigor found in a classic IT data center. That rigor can be perceived (rightly or wrongly) as impeding the agility that the content production/delivery business requires. And DAM has to be seen as agile, responsive and engaged with the business users’ needs.

So, sustaining this asset management world inevitably means balancing core DAM operations values – the discipline, formality even, to sustain the technology platforms predictably – with adaptability, nimbleness and tight business alignment. There may still be thorny a decision on where the DAM responsibility reports – to a back of house infrastructure team running the technology or a core business function such as production or marketing operations. This could also be a decision on whether DAM is owned by a specific line of business (accompanied by the inevitable risk of perceived loyalty or bias towards that group) or run at the enterprise level to serve everyone.

Where multiple businesses or functions are to be supported, enterprise (unimpeachably fair) DAM leadership is always preferable – as part of a broader ECM shared service or grouped with other COO-headed business operations, for example. If the “luxury” of an independent, enterprise DAM function is not feasible, choose the organization that has the most effective relationship with the communities who will use the DAM tools (since actual use of the tools is the single most crucial “measure” of success) and coach them in the other essential operational values.

Beyond these two foundational value sets there are other dimensions of DAM leadership that can really make a difference in the value of asset management to the business.

Thinking like a Product Manager, for example. That means staying one step ahead of the users’ needs, rather than simply reacting to them, and positioning the
portfolio of DAM services to anticipate shift and growth of the business. Product managers must ensure their customers continue to believe this DAM product is their best option – and so should you! Ask where the business is headed. Ask where the commercial product marketplace is headed for each of the major media management capabilities deployed – DAM tools, search engines, etc. Lay out a path that keeps media management meeting business needs as they evolve. Think also about building an adoption plan. More than just “selling” DAM services to new user groups around the company, this means thinking strategically about new users, content types or lines of business, and the sequencing of their on-boarding that drives that adoption most swiftly and smoothly.

Being super-smart with metadata is another area that can take DAM to a higher level. Metadata are already being captured with media, hopefully using templates and models relevant to the content and to the business. But are core metadata values supported with the kinds of relationship and mapping information – the kinds of “intelligence” – that drive valuable search results and that help users find more of what they want (especially where they might not necessarily realize they “want” it or would derive value from it)? Machines and software tools are getting ever better at doing this, of course, especially in processing unstructured information. But there is still very much a place for a librarian or “information architect” looking after the structured metadata plumbing behind the scenes. For all the discussions and presentations and workshops on metadata and nomenclature, this often still gets pigeon-holed as a kind of junior taxonomist role – a Corporate Spell-Checker – but there is much more to achieve.

One of the roles of the librarian has always been to connect people with information. In the past that meant sitting at a desk in the library, interviewing the customer, translating their requirements (inexpertly articulated, usually!) into the right search criteria, then locating the most relevant material. Now everyone expects desktop search engines to do the same with no other human intervention, which does still take some work behind the scenes to bring business intelligence to the underlying metadata repositories. It requires significant knowledge of the company’s products – how they are created, used, sold, etc. – to create metadata models and taxonomy term relationships that drive more relevant search results. Think about what it means to keep users’ self-service searches relevant, usable and driving the maximum discovery of valuable content in the organization. Incidentally, it’s no accident that the role of information architect/plumber is often filled by a creative person rather than a technical or engineering resource – this is a right-brain task.

Then there is governance – a scary word, conjuring up images of dull, grey people sitting through long, dull, grey meetings. And it is certainly possible to turn governance into just that – a ponderous exercise where those participating do so because they have to rather than because they want to. But then who will want to be involved and what does that do to the perception of DAM at the organization overall? Governance is inescapably about making sure that the right people are shaping and buying into the big decisions – directional, strategic and, of course, financial – but it need not be ponderous. Don’t make it simply about annual budget approval. Get the big names talking about DAM, its issues and its business impact on a regular basis, and equip them to evangelize it not simply to comment on it. Involve them in significant operational decisions and expose them to a broad and ongoing picture – much more sophisticated than the annual PowerPoint. Above all make them partners, stakeholders, more than bosses. The influence that business leaders have with each other is much more powerful than the influence any enterprise technology or operations team will have – use that power.

As these facets of asset management leadership grow and develop, product management, information architecture and thoughtful governance are value
systems that can start to push DAM beyond being a simple application and towards it being a center of expertise for digital media strategy in a much more general sense. Making DAM more of a partner in strategic company planning, rather than just a machine on the factory floor. As content consumption models become ever more intertwined with our daily lives – whether that content is a movie or an advertisement – strategic planning around digital media continues to become a more and more significant element of running any company (not just a film studio). Perhaps DAM's highest calling of all.

Back to the question of measuring success. Management consultants speak in terms of defining KPIs – the Key Performance Indicators. Unfortunately the most important KPI is the least scientific of all – are people actually and willingly using the DAM tools. This gives those management consultants a bit of a headache since it is challenging to characterize in a spreadsheet. But there are definite, concrete metrics for which real measurement is possible and around which a solid picture of usage and direction and value can be built.

Start with elements that can be counted – easy (maybe scientific) metrics such as how many assets exist, how many are downloaded or distributed and how those numbers change and trend each week, day or hour. There may also be value in counting user activity – logins, transactions and even how many (or how few) technical support tickets are opened.

More subtle (but also scientific) are measurements of what searches the user population is executing, the relative frequency by which different types of search are used (keywords vs. facets, for example) and then how often those users download an asset from their first search results screen (indicating the tools are delivering valuable search results quickly). Even the health of the metadata itself can be measured – what proportion of the metadata fields are being filled in, how consistent is the application of taxonomy or field format standards, and so on.

Most challenging can be measurement of business efficiency and agility. If work was done to characterize realizable efficiency and potential future value during a cost justification or business case phase when the project was first launched then keep those templates alive. As well as tracking business value it can be very helpful in keeping user groups honest in apportioning their own, local business value (growth, new deals, etc.) to the DAM platform.
Another elusive metric can be the value of the assets themselves – how often they are used, maybe even how they are used. It’s surprisingly common that companies do not completely understand the value of their asset collections – use DAM as a tool to help address that challenge. All of these measurable elements can meaningfully inform immediate operational decision making, medium term direction and longer term strategic planning.

Leading an asset management function in today’s business landscape does take work, thoughtful organization planning, a focus on some new areas of expertise and perhaps some re-thinking of governance and leadership engagement. But as an increasingly critical hub of information and content in a world where information- and content-agility are foundational business differentiators, who would want to be anywhere else!

Acknowledgement


About the Author

Graham Allan has spent almost 20 years in digital media and entertainment technology, leading DAM and file-based transformation for several top M&E companies – from strategy & business case development to product/partner selection, systems deployment and organizational design/development. Fifteen of those years were spent driving DAM and infrastructure software initiatives for Disney’s animation, film and television divisions, and directing the company’s enterprise integrated MAM strategy. He is Senior Director, Consulting, for Cognizant Technology Solutions where he leads a broad range of technology professional services initiatives for media and entertainment. DAMpractice@cognizant.com | Linkedin: linkedin.com/pub/graham-allan/0/93/b55.
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