**Taming the Information Jungle**

**Featuring: Peggy Winton, President and CEO, Association for Intelligent Information Management**

**Overview**

Content that spreads like kudzu, data so camouflaged that it can never be found and compliance violations lurking in the swampy water—members of the Association for Intelligent Information Management (AIIM) are the experts who give systems as chaotic as the Costa Rican rain forest the order of an English garden.

AIIM, headed by CEO Peggy Winton, is waist deep in today’s most ubiquitous business phenomenon—digital transformation. The organization provides research, education and certification programs to a global spectrum of information professionals. This up-to-the-minute orientation is the result of a long evolutionary process.

AIIM was founded in 1943 as the National Microfilm Association. As technology advanced, the organization’s scope adapted and expanded with it. In 1982 the name was changed to the Association for Information and Image Management. By 2017 a new landscape was emerging. Technology, once a servant of many other business activities, had become the master of all. AIIM reinvented itself again. It kept its well-known acronym but adopted its current name to reflect a re-envisioned orientation and perspective. Although the organization runs ahead of the pack, it remains firmly focused on the long-standing goal of helping people put information to work.

**AIIM by the Numbers**

* 21 employees drive $5.5 million in annual revenue
* 155,000 active subscribers in dozens of countries worldwide
  + 56% are from large enterprises
  + 15% are senior management/executives
  + 29% are from the line of business, 28% are IT staff, 26% are information professionals.
* Top-5 regions represented: United States, Canada, United Kingdom, DACH, and Benelux
* Top-5 industries represented: financial services (banking/insurance), government, healthcare/pharma, education, manufacturing/utilities and construction/engineering.

**Sitting in the Crosshairs of Change**

The industries represented by AIIM’s members put them directly in the path of change and disruption. “Digital transformation has so many meanings,” says Winton. “People are viewing technology and its relationship to their work in totally different ways. Change and new business models are occurring in unexpected places.”

In this brave new world, where artificial intelligence and deep learning are redefining content management, AIIM had to consider whether its core services would become irrelevant. Leaders took a hard look at the technology landscape and their industry’s competencies. They viewed their world through a kaleidoscope to see whether they could imagine it in a new way. That journey led them to the decision that content is, and will continue to be, a significant component of digital transformation. However, the board and staff also realized that this was the optimal time to define their purpose in more holistic terms and to move toward an analytic, data-centric, and application-oriented approach.

AIIM used information-driven terminology to develop a road map for digital transformation. The process, which they call intelligent information management, provides a foundation to support additional layers of resources and technology. AIIM now has a set of tasks and strategies that will integrate successfully with emerging trends. This approach keeps content relevant in the era of robotics and blockchain. The organization reinvented its industry practice and renamed itself to highlight this innovative approach to the future.

When an association makes such a significant leap some members bridge the gap more nimbly than others. Staff and volunteers may also need to recast their activities in a different light. As an example, Winton notes that among her constituents, compliance and records officers found themselves marginalized by business capabilities that bundled their services into larger platforms. As such, this segment of the membership needed to learn how to change the conversation about information governance. Instead of focusing on control, they discovered that they could flip the concept and highlight the value of using data to achieve exciting new business breakthroughs.

**Seizing the UBER Mentality**

Reinvention and renewal are entrenched in AIIM’s culture. “Why” is a question that is always on the agenda. The organization constantly assesses operations to identify how to work better or smarter. “When you cast off old shackles, resources are freed up,” Winton advises. “We’re only 21 people, and we’re driving $5.5 million in revenue. I’m proud of that. I think that is possible because we don’t accept outdated models. I want my staff to be excited about working on innovative projects. When you remove the barriers, it’s amazing what you can accomplish.”

Winton believes that all associations can benefit from closer scrutiny of their intentions and purposes. She cautions, “Digital transformation isn’t really about technology at all. It’s about the need to anticipate and enhance the customer’s experience. That’s where associations fall short. We say that we are membership based, but are we really making it easier to do business with us? Are our products and services enriching people’s lives?”

AIIM’s culture makes customer satisfaction the driver of every initiative. In Winton’s view, associations can’t just meet expectations. They must be as good or better than other providers at satisfying their members’ needs. Customized experiences at a click, from an array of dinner options ready to heat and eat to wardrobes selected by a personal stylist, are the norm rather than the exception. Association’s that don’t strive to meet their members’ individual needs are flirting with irrelevance. Winton recommends seizing the Uber mentality to remove friction from everyday processes. “I challenged my team to make this the year of the hack,” Winton said. “I urged them to figure out how to combine things that we already have in new and different ways.”

In keeping with the philosophy of reinvention, AIIM long ago embraced an inclusive membership structure. “We saw the tremendous lifetime value of our relationship with people who, while consuming our extensive educational content and services, do not become dues payers. So many workers are now engaged in information management as part of jobs that have nothing to do with IT or records management. Enlisting them as subscribers gave us a revolving door of fresh new line of business owners who are today’s ideal technology customers and a fantastic audience for the vendors in our space.”

**Growing New Leaders**

A professional, as well as a personal, commitment to excellence defines Winton’s leadership style. She is as focused on strengthening her team as she is on building a successful organization. “My personal goal is to make opportunities for the future leaders at AIIM. Our organization had been pretty tall and top-heavy. To change that, we came up with a structure that allows for on-demand project work in blended, cross-functional teams. It’s a way to use people’s best talents regardless of their department or responsibility.” Winton also notes that this skill-based, collaborative model is the way millennials prefer to work. “The success is shared. Nobody feels like they have the entire profit and loss resting solely on their shoulders.”

Helping other women succeed is an especially meaningful piece of Winton’s professional development goals. She describes her vision like this, “I wanted to ask how women in this industry could better help each other. We launched a Women in Information subgroup to our community last year. We now have over 2,000 members who are actively involved. We didn’t want it all to focus on technology or industry education. We really wanted to highlight helping other women achieve leadership roles within their organizations, on boards of directors, and within the AIIM community. I hope this will be a pipeline for our own board, and I view my younger staff in that same way. I want to create opportunities for them.”

As she develops a leadership conduit to bring value to her organization, Winton also sees associations creating entirely new types of resources for their members and their industries’ customers. Although the power of artificial intelligence and other emerging technology might make some uncomfortable (because of its human displacement potential), it can be harnessed to provide a deeper understanding of the business environment. Savvy leaders can use big data to identify all kinds of trends that lead to a deeper customer understanding. Winton also suggests that associations can heighten their consumer awareness by recruiting the younger generation. She says, “AIIM has 150,000 subscribers. We are capturing and analyzing so much behavioral information that we can use in a variety of ways to enhance the customer experience both for our members and ourselves. In the near future, when we are able to add the power of AI to our data analytics, we will have an incredible resource that we can use to create engagement that becomes increasingly meaningful and rewarding for our constituents.”

**What Association Executives Can Learn From AIIM**

1. **Confront disruption creatively.** AIIM prepared for the future by closely examining its purposes and determining how to repackage its mission.
2. **Question everything.** Winton and her team are not afraid to ask “why?” They objectively evaluate procedures and processes and eliminate outdated activities that no longer serve their customers or their mission.
3. **Seize the UBER mentality.** Winton challenges the staff to think creatively. They actively seek to combine existing components in exciting new ways.
4. **Create opportunities for leadership.** Winton believes that when you elevate your team, you strengthen your organization.
5. **Be a big tent.** Recruit younger people for your team and be diverse. Insight from many perspectives generates ideas and innovation.
6. **Consider a more fluid organizational structure.** Cross-functional teams play to employees’ skills and interests. This approach encourages creativity and initiative.
7. **See opportunity over challenge. Identify hard trends, then apply** the power of new technology to better understand customers.

**Food for Thought**

* Could your association’s mission be viewed in new and more creative ways?
* Are you questioning your procedures and policies frequently enough?
* Are there outdated activities and systems you could shelve to make room for new initiatives?
* Could your association benefit from a more fluid organizational structure that includes blended cross-functional teams?