
An Introduction to Digital Asset Management

A Celstream Technologies White Paper

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INTRODUCTION

"Where's the material from the last ad campaign...?" You could as soon have said: "...I remember saving it in this directory, but...".

A law firm of long standing is fighting an environment-related case. The lawyer assigned to the case needs to learn from all the earlier cases his firm has won.

A health care provider needs a patient's medical records urgently. Unfortunately they are available in parts and are not complete.

The frustration of not finding something when it is needed most would be familiar to most of us. Each of these scenarios exposes at least a cost and time implication if not a life-threatening contingency as in the last scenario.

Each of these scenarios can take a turn for the worse if crucial assets are not available in a timely manner.

For a brand manager, not finding the material from the last ad campaign can mean starting all over again and perhaps missing a deadline. A lawyer not forearmed with information might not be able to influence his case. A patient's life might hang in the balance if his medical history cannot be located on time.

In this age of net-speed and the knowledge economy, a business or service needs to have time on its side whether it is dealing with special situations or meeting the day-to-day challenges.

Read on to discover how an Asset Management solution can help you do just that, and more.

WHAT IS AN ASSET?

If an organization lives in the minds of its brightest people, an organization's identity and its competencies live in its knowledge and business-value driving artifacts. In the broadest sense, these artifacts can be called assets.

Operationally, they may translate to brand and brand-related information such as logos and colophons, brand manuals, product specification, brochures, marketing collateral, project briefs or proposals. For a law firm for instance, assets such as case histories or strategies used to argue a certain type of case could characterize their collective knowledge. It is assumed that an asset is digital in nature or can be converted into one.

THE CASE FOR ASSET MANAGEMENT

Industry productivity studies indicate that people are often unable to locate the files they are looking for at their first attempt, and that significant time is wasted in locating the relevant files.

Improving just this aspect over time and across departments would by itself improve productivity. But the improvements that can pay for themselves many times over are:

- Being able to keep tabs on assets that would get irretrievably lost because of inconsistent or individualized storage schemes ("it is in my top drawer").
- 'Discovering' that some asset your other office produced last year can be reused today and can cut your production time by a considerable margin.

You would agree that if time is money, then locating your marketing collateral,

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brand assets, or any crucial document for that matter in a timely fashion, could help you save money. That is for starters; it can even help you add new revenue streams or discover new business models by helping you make your assets saleable or licensable items as painlessly as possible.

DO YOU KNOW YOUR ASSETS?

Do you find departments producing assets from scratch because they cannot locate the physical media they copied it to? Does your marketing department find it easier to produce that artwork from scratch because they do not want to pore over stacks of media to find what they can reuse? Do you have old material in a form that cannot be re-purposed for your new web site? Do you have stacks of stills you can license out but do not know how to let people 'try and buy'? If the answers to these questions raise your discomfort level, one of the reasons could be that you can already see what you are missing out on by not having enough knowledge about your organization's assets.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBILITIES?

How can you get your assets to become more valuable to you? There could be numerous ways in which you could do this, assuming that you have defined and identified them. Assets could be cataloged; they could be made searchable with key words or specific attribute values; or they could be re-purposed. Each of these capabilities that you can add to your assets allows their utilization in new ways and opens up new business opportunities for you. But before you can do any of this, you need to associate metadata with your assets in a diligent manner.

METADATA

Quite literally, this means 'data about data'; in other words: information about the asset. Metadata is closely associated with the meaning that we attach to a particular asset. This is one of the reasons why generating metadata for assets (or any content for that matter) is a challenging task.

Let us illustrate this with an example.

Given an audio-visual clip of a Presidential Address, the obvious metadata would be the date and time of the address, and the actual words of the address. The metadata that would not be so obviously available would be, let us say, the political implications or the analysis of the address. We would require a human agent to generate this metadata and associate it with the clip of the address.

From this example, it is easy to see how some asset may just not be visible in a particular context if the right metadata is not associated with it. For instance, a student of political science trying to search and find Eventful Presidential Addresses will simply not find them unless the semantics of something being eventful is understood during the metadata generation and association stage.

In the real world, attaching metadata is a holistic operation. It characterizes a corpus of assets in its entirety and generates a schema that can depict and expose the attributes of an asset amenable to user-specific search contexts.

HOW DO YOU LOCATE ASSETS?

This must be quite obvious by now. One could search the metadata for keywords (assuming the metadata is

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textual) and then get a pointer to the asset. The pointer has information on the location of the asset but this is transparent to a user.

This kind of indirection allows an asset management system to hide the physical organization of the asset data from users and also to maintain data security. It also helps policy enforcement. For instance, the asset pointer will always point to the latest generated version of the asset – perhaps a weather satellite photograph or a developing news story.

One could also visually search for assets using a pictorial index generated by a video logger. A typical video logger might catalog key frames in the form of thumbnails and associate metadata with them. A user could browse from one key frame in a low-res(olution) version of the video. After finding the video segment of interest, the user can directly map it to the high-res copy using time code information and use it for the

workflow downstream.

A BASIC SYSTEM

Let us see some essential features and attributes of an asset management system. We are talking of a system here that can publish pre-approved assets, advertise them in a systematic manner, help with locating assets, and provide an interface to ingest digital assets in a streamlined manner. Are your assets distributed? Are the system users inside your company or outside it? An asset management system needs to take all these aspects into account.

Roles

An asset management system helps you define roles in relation to your assets. The scheme of roles should be such that it makes things easy for authenticated users but at the same time protects assets from unauthorized access. We will examine one such scheme.

You can have an executive administrator

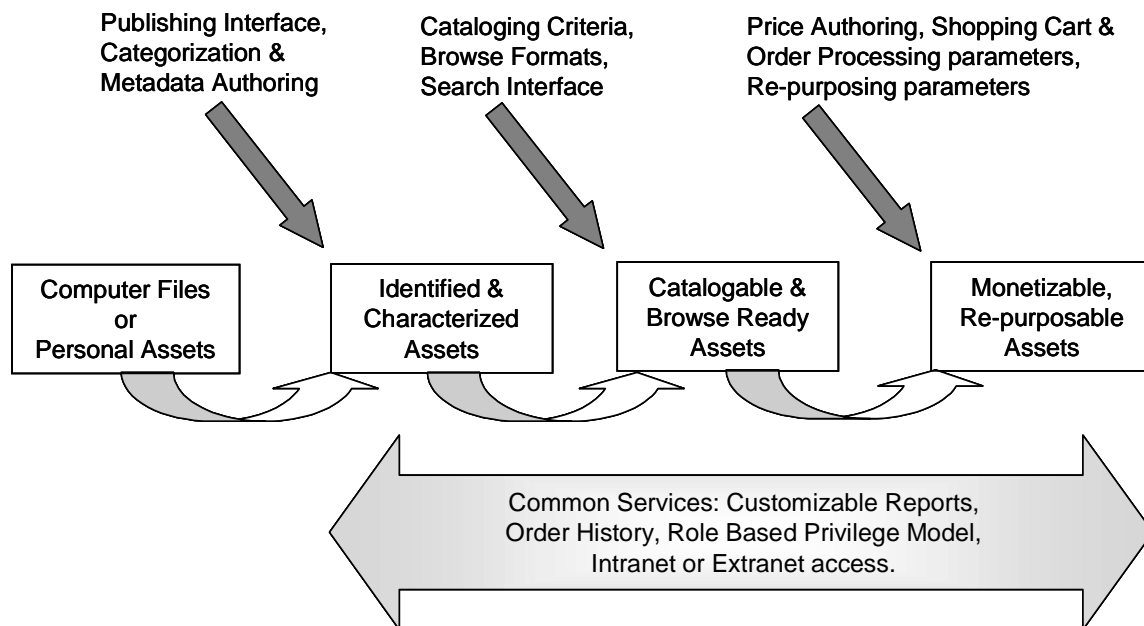


Figure 1. Building an Asset Management System

(ExecAdmin) who has overall responsibility for the site. By implication, this person can also influence the asset management strategy for your organization.

The ExecAdmin can in turn authorize specific asset management roles at the department level. This helps you move asset management control to the level assets are produced and modified.

Department level asset managers can in turn authorize users with specific privileges in their own or other departments. Such an arrangement helps departments advertise assets (more on this later) and even track the amount of reuse.

In addition, you can define the role of an Asset Owner who would have local rights on specific assets he or she owns.

An Order Fulfiller's role can be created if your business or corporate requirements need human intervention to service an asset request.

Categorizing Assets

Your assets need to be categorized for ease of use and also because of their diversity. Based on the structure of your business, your assets might already be categorised by business unit. An asset management system must support the existing asset categories and should also help you create new categories. It should help you restrict specific users to certain levels in the category hierarchy or to specific kinds of assets. For instance, employees of a specific business unit might be allowed access only to assets pertaining to their unit. You would want to restrict access to ultrasound scans to just the patient and his or her health care professional.

However, articles of general interest might have unrestricted read access.

Showcasing Assets

An asset management system also helps you to publish your assets using asset proxies and designated asset attributes. What this means is that the asset management system can do a 'show-and-tell' for your assets. It can build an asset catalog for you. It can help you search this catalog using key words.

Shopping Cart

Should you wish to allow formal ordering of assets, or log asset utilization, or even bill customers later, the asset management system has to have a shopping cart facility that will help customers prepare orders and send them over to your Order Fulfiller.

Repurposing for End Use

Digital assets would seldom get used in the same form (read format or size). If you wish to put pictures on the web, you would want them in a size and format that downloads fast. But if you are doing a T-shirt transfer, resolution is more important.

An asset management system helps you transform an asset to its intended end-use before you download it. Your downloaded asset is ready to use.

Uploading Assets

You should be able to conveniently upload assets and their associated metadata using a desktop interface.

Customization

An asset management system belongs to your work environment. Thus, it should be customizable to sport your company's colours, and logos.

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Flexible Access to Assets

Your users should be able to interact with the asset management system across platforms and physical locations.

An asset management system should help you access assets on the corporate intranet. But it should also help extranet users use specific asset categories for their purpose. For a large diagnostic facility, the extranet user might be your family physician, who wants authorization to access your personal medical records.

Reports

An asset management system should help you examine asset utilization with the help of the various custom reports it can generate.

SCENARIOS

Medical Data

A diagnostic center or a hospital offers a host of services to its customers – X-rays, ultrasound scans, and clinical investigation to name a few. With each of these services would be associated data (the X-ray or ultrasound image, the laboratory analysis report), and a specialist who interprets the data and prescribes treatment. An intangible aspect of the data is that it is sensitive and confidential.

A person is overtaken by a medical emergency. Health care workers need access to all his medical records and history. The person has kept some medical records at home but the health care professionals have a hard time figuring out if he is allergic to certain drugs. The diagnostic center this person visits does not archive patient records but hands them over to the patient(s).

Imagine that this diagnostic center has an asset management system. It has an opportunity to offer its customers (both patients and doctors) a value adding service. It can catalog diagnostic data and make authorized access over the extranet possible to both its patients and their respective doctors.

Brand Promotion

You are planning a brand promotion over a large geographical area. You have channels and channel partners who need to be supplied with consistent branding and product information. You cannot project how many copies of collateral each channel or outlet will need.

It takes you quite a while to locate all material (you know you can use most of the material from earlier promos) because you cannot locate the correct assets in a timely fashion; the key person who knew about the earlier campaigns has since left the company. You decide you want to ship CD-ROMS with collateral. You have to burn or duplicate perhaps hundreds. Some retail chains do not get the brochures on time and you have already announced the promo. They try and use brochures from previous promo – they would have been wasted anyway because you printed more than what was needed.

With an asset management system, you have your assets cataloged already. You are able to pull together the material you want in a consistent manner. You create your collateral and brochures, convert them to PDF and upload them with metadata (so that you can search for and access them during your next campaign). Your channel partners and retail chains already have web accounts

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to access material for the promo. Just a couple of days before the promo, they download the PDF and get brochures done through short run digital printing. They can always print more at short notice. What is more, your regional offices can run local promos at very short notice with relatively little assistance from corporate marketing.

Monetising Assets

You could be a pre-press shop, or a photographic agency. You have assets that you know are valuable to as yet unexplored customer segments but do not know how to showcase them.

You could create printed catalogs and distribute them. But then your customers have to bear with long update cycles. The cost of producing a catalog is high and that would increase your cost of sales. If your inventory of monetisable assets turns over rapidly, there is no way the printed medium can keep pace with it.

Enter an asset management system. You can set up a virtual web storefront for your monetisable assets so that customers can browse or preview them before placing an order for them. You could outsource order fulfilling or keep it in close proximity to your business. The role of the Order Fulfiler would get notified when customers anywhere on the Internet browse your assets and decide to buy them.

AFTERWORD

Asset Management more than pays for itself in the medium to long term depending on the number of assets and their frequency of getting reused, repurposed, or purchased. Initially, it might seem like an investment that has

to be recovered; but ultimately having an asset management capability would become an imperative for any business that values its knowledge and the assets produced with this knowledge. Asset management systems such as Celstream AssetWorks™ allows you to start with a basic asset management system that can be customised to your specific business needs and grow as your needs expand.

About The Author

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