Are You a Digital Hoarder?

The Warning Signs
We all know the TV reality shows about hoarders: garages filled to the top with yard-sale bargains; paths through living rooms filled with years of magazines and newspapers; every available space used for storage, even the bed. While we may look in amazement at these scenes of chaos in other people’s lives, lurking in our own organizations, and even on our home computers, we may find our own hoards—digital hoards, that is.

Here are a few signs that might show if you or a friend are a digital hoarder:
• If you keep electronic records well beyond their required retention period “just in case somebody might need them,” you may be a digital hoarder.
• If you are using workplace servers as a “private cloud” to back up your collection of vacation photos and other personal records, you may be a digital hoarder.
• If you blind copy work messages to your personal email as a backup, you may be a digital hoarder.

But do not despair, you are not alone, and there is help. Understanding how we become hoarders and how to better manage our digital treasures is the first step to recovery.

It Doesn’t Hurt Anyone
On the surface, digital hoarding seems harmless enough. Most digital hoarders manage to keep their problem under control, hold a good job, and take care of their family. After all, those piles of digital holdings will not turn into a giant kitty-litter box or become infested by rats and roaches. But beware digital ROT—Redundant, Obsolete and Transitory items that may well make up most of the materials that get saved. A Veritas Global Databerg survey in 2016 suggested that 85 percent of the digital material being managed on any given day has little or no business value and could be considered digital ROT.¹

That equals wasted time and money.

Can you find what you need? An important indicator of an effective records management system is the ability to find the right information when needed. This is especially true when producing documents for the public. Courts are all too familiar with the time and expense required to respond to a request for court data. Ideally, electronic records properly stored and maintained should be easier to find.

Unlike those old paper files, which pile up in basements and utility rooms, digital records are comfortably out-of-sight and out-of-mind. Deferring destruction or transfer to archival media doesn’t cause any visible inconvenience or discomfort. But

this is the part of the records management program that is often neglected and forgotten. Without regular migration to new media, software, and hardware, electronic records will eventually become inaccessible due to technical obsolescence. How about those WordPerfect files you carefully saved on floppy disks?

Many people are hoarders by nature and will resist letting go of their information assets without a clear and convincing reason. The easiest thing to do is nothing. The bottom line is if an organization has a policy, it must execute the policy consistently. It is not good enough to go on a spring-cleaning binge one year and then ignore it the next. If there is one important behavior regarding a retention program, it is consistency. And with any policy, it is worthless if execution is inconsistent or nonexistent.

The Enablers

Every addiction has its enablers—people or circumstances that encourage or allow the behavior to continue. In this case the continuing evolution of technology, particularly storage technology, is probably the biggest enabler. There are several aspects to this:

Too Much Room—For traditional hoarders there is a physical limit; rooms are only so big, and you cannot expand the collection to your neighbor’s yard. But the “digital room” seems to be expanding by the minute. With the price of digital storage decreasing over 30 percent a year, the price per gigabit just continues to drop.

Too Many Closets—The variety of storage options makes it easy to stash digital materials in places only the person who put them there can find, such as on office notebooks, the home PC, smart phone, DVDs, and flash storage. The variety of personal storage devices, combined with their increasing capacity, only encourages users to fill these spaces with more information and worry about whether they will really need it later.

Too Much Stuff—The volume of information we receive and process every day also continues to grow. According to Gartner, unstructured data (office automation, email, instant messaging) is growing by nearly 80 percent annually, with no end in sight. Figuring out what is and is not important can be overwhelming.2

The trends in storage cost and increasing number of options for retaining digital information are likely to continue. However, these enablers mask the real costs of digital hoarding. While storage is cheap, managing it is not.

**Control the Dark Side**

Digital hoarding has its dark side—dark data, that is. With information created, stored, and backed up in a multitude of locations in the corporate information system or personal devices, getting a handle on information that has limited value is a challenge. Employees email and store files in personal network directories; former employees leave behind material that has escaped deletion; and staff create their own databases and spreadsheets for managing their work. On top of that, much of this information is constantly being backed up, whether it has continuing value or not.

Working closely with information technology staff can help ferret out ROT that lurks in forgotten corners of servers. Collaboration with IT to inventory current collections using a records crawler or other tools can identify these forgotten records and determine what should be retained and what is ROT. Too many cute animal videos on the network? Are your shared drives a cheap alternative for backing up family photos? Taking time to inventory your digital collection can be the starting point for a discussion about better use of storage assets and the need for additional policies or training to hold staff accountable.³

**Time to Take Out the Garbage**

Many retention schedules have yet to catch up with the computer age. Even though many organizations operate in a “paper-on-demand” environment in which the digital record is the official record, some retention schedules still primarily address the typical hybrid system where paper records remain the “official” version and digital records are for back up or convenience. Including digital records in the official retention and disposition schedule is a must, and deletion of expired material should be conducted regularly, if not automatically.

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It’s About Change
Ingrained habits are difficult to change. Everyone should be aware of how better records governance and more efficient information access makes life easier at home and in the workplace. Long-lasting change is often achieved incrementally. Making the case for change is often the first step. Everyone should understand the need for change before accepting it. One strategy is to survey or inventory current digital holdings to gain a better understanding of the scope of the problem. With that information in hand, engaging information users in an assessment of how this affects efficiency and productivity will promote understanding. Do not be afraid to back up your claims with numbers. Does better attention to deletion improve access times for records, reduce the time to find information, and improve productivity?

Conclusion
The unprecedented growth in digital information is going to continue unabated. Individuals and organizations need to be aware of how digital hoarding can not only complicate access to information, but also, in the long run, jeopardize its preservation. Start practicing good digital habits today for a healthier tomorrow.

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