

newsworthy trends

Protecting Your Documents From The Digital Dark Ages

(NAPSA)—If you're like many people, you file your taxes electronically and download your bank statements from your bank's Web site. You may also organize virtually everything on your personal computer instead of using bulky paper files stuffed into a steel filing cabinet. Plus, you've most likely made the transition to a digital camera and have scores of digital photos on your hard drive—birthdays, weddings, holidays, etc.

But all these digital records may present a problem. Fast-forward 10 years when you need to access your bank and tax files to apply for a loan. Fast-forward 40 years when you want to show those photos to your grandchildren. These digital files, created in the early era of the digital revolution, will probably not open. The file format you used to create them will probably be considered obsolete, and the programs you used to create and view them may not exist anymore. You may find yourself trapped in a sort of digital dark age.

You are not alone. Many historians cringe when they think of government and scientific records that have been lost because the technology used to capture the data deteriorated or became obsolete. Two of the most infamous recent examples are the loss of hundreds of military files from the Vietnam War and magnetic tapes from the Viking Mission to Mars



New efforts are being made to preserve precious electronic documents.

that disintegrated over time.

Also now on the endangered historical documents list is the World Wide Web itself, the largest living document ever created. With four billion public pages and another 550 billion pages accessible via the “deep Web” (content on the Web that is not found by most search engines), it is 55 times larger than the entire Library of Congress. The Web adds seven million new pages every day, but on average, those pages disappear in 44 days.

“We have a recording of the first telephone call ever placed—Alexander Graham Bell asking his assistant, ‘Watson, come here’—but we don’t have a copy of the first e-mail sent or the first Web site or even the first Instant Message,” said Melonie Warfel, director of worldwide standards for Adobe Systems Incorporated. “We are in an age where our recent history is rapidly disap-

pearing before our eyes.”

Many electronic archives today use Adobe’s ubiquitous file format Portable Document Format (PDF) to archive large amounts of digital records. For example, the bankruptcy filings of Enron, Global Crossing and WorldCom were submitted to the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts in PDF and will most likely be archived in PDF for historical preservation.

The format is so ubiquitous that it is estimated that 9.2 percent of the surface Web is made up of PDF documents. However, there is no guarantee that a file rendered in PDF today will be accessible in 20, 50 or 100 years. That is why, starting in 2002, an international group of archivists, librarians, records managers and technologists set out to develop the PDF/Archive (PDF/A) standard to ensure that electronic files can be retrieved long after the technologies currently used are abandoned and replaced with newer technologies. PDF/A was recently ratified by the International Organization for Standardization in May, and is in the early stages of implementation worldwide.

Historians hope that such efforts will let us protect the precious, irreplaceable records of today, while at the same time preserving our ability to access them in the future. Otherwise, they say, as technological advances propel us into the future, we risk leaving the past in the digital dust.