



Information Overload

Issue 48, August 2006

Welcome:

Given the issue number of this particular edition, Information Overload will be starting its 5th year of publication in September this year. What started out as a “good idea” has grown from a few hundred subscribers to almost a thousand people who receive a copy directly each month! It never ceases to amaze me to think we now have readers across a dozen countries and I would just like to say thank you for helping to spread the information contained in Information Overload to a wider audience.

Whilst not intending to be a radio 2 link, I’m afraid that’s what it is going to sound like! In this month’s edition, we will be looking at the role of information and how it impacts on our lives. We will also look at what value we place on having the right information at the right time to make the right kind of decisions, decisions that can and do impact on the lives of everyone associated with us.

We would like to thank you in advance for forwarding this edition onto friends, colleagues and other interested readers. Please note that all back issues of this edition, as well as our registrant resources edition can be read and/or downloaded from our web site – <http://www.iea.com.au> should any of the topics be of interest and use. As a matter of interest the registrant resources edition will also be starting its 5th year of publication, and we are very pleased to know that these e-zines have helped in some way to assist readers in finding new work opportunities. The August edition of the Registrant Resources edition discusses the issue of “soft skills” required to do the job that you are doing, rather than the technological know-how and nice bits of paper deemed “essential” selection criterion. What do we mean by soft skills? Well the answer can be found in the August edition. As always we hope you find the information of interest and use.

Lorraine Bradshaw
Marketing Coordinator and Projects Officer

In this Issue we will be looking at:

- What is this thing called “information”
- So what value do we place on information?
- Philanthropy or just good business decisions?
- A Thought to ponder.

What is this thing called “information”

Information can be defined (Wikipedia – <http://en.wikipedia.com>) as “as a collection of facts from which conclusions may be drawn....information is the result of processing, manipulating and organizing data in a way that adds to the knowledge of the person receiving it.”

It sounds so simple when you put it like that doesn’t it. But information is more than just a collection of facts that we can manipulate. Regardless of the work that we do, we all work in the information industry – rather a strange thing to say really. But if you think about it – the

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information that you have as an individual, and the information your organisation has, can be manipulated into “knowledge”. The knowledge that is generated as a result of this collection of data, and dissemination of information can be the difference between having a successful business or not. It may even save a life or two.

On the television a few days ago, there was a news story on New Orleans and the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. Nothing new there, it has been all over the wires of late – why? Because it is a year ago since the devastation and the damage occurred. But what has that got to do with information? Well the story covered a number of prisoners on death row who were hoping to have their convictions overturned or at the very least reduced. And they were banking on the information collected by the police for that to happen. As you can imagine, most (if not all) the death row inmates had at least one appeal on the go, the problem was – the information relating to all the cases was kept in a basement. This fragile information (imagine being convicted on the results of a DNA sample from something as small as a hair or piece of cloth) was damaged beyond recovery because of the water that swept through the buildings because of the hurricane.

We know that information is fragile at best, but for the people on death row with absolutely no hope of ever proving their innocence – a lack of information, can be a killer. Will these people receive clemency because they can't prove one way or the other now? I would hope so, but a comment from an associate said it was doubtful – because we were talking about Louisiana!!

So what value do we place on information?

In this particular case – how can you put a price on the wrong conviction of just a single person? What price life?

Does this sound like a rather dramatic example of the value that information has. I don't think so. How would you feel as an information manager to find that the disaster plan that you had in place could not cover something of this magnitude? How would you feel if you had been the person advocating a purpose built storage facility that could have prevented this kind of destruction happening? Only to have your pleas land on deaf ears. Unfortunately as we all know – it happens all the time. And changes will only begin to happen if it hurts badly enough.

For most people in the business community – pain equates to money. The bigger the stick – the more likely we are to notice and to try and do something about it. We have seen, as you have, the increasing amount of money (fines) being imposed on organisations that fail to provide adequate information relating to business activities in a court of law. Unfortunately, until more people feel a dent in their hip pocket, we are still going to suffer from the “it can't happen here” mentality.

But is money the only aspect to the value we place on information?

As the example with Hurricane Katrina and the evidence relating to death row inmates has proven, storage of information is a vital piece to the records management puzzle. The question is – where do you store it? You may have noticed the recent discussions and news reports on the various list serves around the world have highlighted the problems of outsourcing this vital task.

http://searchstorage.techtarget.com/originalContent/0,289142,sid5_gci1205024,00.html

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It is perhaps a little ironic that a storage facility tasked to safeguard business records should find itself being destroyed. So what can organisations do? Whilst discussions have ranged from keeping electronic documents “live” and migrating them through the various upgrades, to taking copies of important documents and storing them in a second location – it is even more interesting to note that a second facility owned by this particular storage company was also damaged recently. This second facility was in another country !! Whilst this may also seem like an extreme example of the problems facing the Information Community world wide, it is a very real problem. The many wars that continue to rage throughout the world are one example, add the Terrorist dimension to the problem, and we can be justifiably concerned. Add global disasters the size of the Boxing Day Tsunami that devastated many countries and I often wonder what we do have to do to safeguard this fragile material.

Do we outsource the storage of our business records to another organisation and hope they can safeguard this precious resource, or do we build our own storage facilities? Or do we rely on the building that we currently own and hope they are sufficiently fire, water, storm and rodent proof to prevent serious decay and destruction. Previous editions of Information Overload have covered the topics of Disaster Planning (Issue 29) and Electronic Archiving (Issues 19 and 19.1) so we won't cover them here. But one of the things we haven't yet discussed is money. If you are part of your organisations team of people tasked with storing and managing of information, how on earth do you hope to persuade the powers that be (i.e., the bean counters) that information needs to be preserved for decades in a controlled environment, and not left to the vagaries of the many different staff members and management in particular. But if internal resources (money, space) are in short supply, are there any alternatives?

Philanthropy or good business decisions?

Now, before you think, that this lack of funds and facilities is just a “records management” problem, I would have to advise you that this isn't the case at all. When we talk about maintaining access to the world of information, we also need to take into consideration the other considerable amount of printed matter – books.

Books – the wealth of the world condensed into a form and format that has lasted hundreds of years. The problem, as most librarians and preservationists know is that books are made up of cellulose fibres, printed with chemicals and left on open shelves. Stored and handled correctly these items can last forever. Unfortunately – or fortunately if you depend on the revenue of sales – books (or rather the paper that forms the basis of the book) deteriorates with age and use. Sunlight breaks down the lignin in the paper (yellowing), insects and rodents delight in the ample food and bedding supply, overheating, over-zealous sprinkler systems, and acts of God and Terrorism, combined with the sticky fingers means that these items need replacing or repairing on a regular basis.

Of course the larger and more diverse the collection, the more diverse the problems.

For example, The British Library say that at their current conservation rates it will take about 100 years to restore their current collection. And that's just the printed collection. If you start to add in the issues surrounding maintaining access to the electronic collection and you have to wonder where the additional money is going to come from.

Do our libraries and collecting institutions have to rely on outside donations? Should they rely on outside donations, and if they do – where does the money come from?

The British Library has several programs in place including "adopt a book" where for just 25 pounds you can choose a title to adopt. Or you can become a patron of the British Library. What is disturbing though is not that these organisations (and it's not just the BL who are doing this kind of thing) but the fact that for several thousand pounds you get special privileges. A case of the have's and the have nots perhaps? However, all cynicism aside patrons and benefactors have played a important role in world's artistic and scientific achievements. <http://www.bl.uk/about/cooperation/blpatrons.html>.

It is also true that the information world has seen a huge benefit because of philanthropy – Andrew Carnegie is perhaps the best known for his work in helping to establish the Public Library System in America. But in recent times, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has taken another step towards ensuring access to the world's information for everyone. Back in 1998, they supplied the first computers to some of the countries poorest communities. Since 1998, the foundation has installed or paid for more than 47,000 pc's.

Did they all use the Microsoft operating suite of products? Of course not, but a considerable majority of them did. Most of the initial computers have since been upgraded, and with them the software, so was this a case of philanthropy or just a very smart marketing and business decision? Whatever your personal thoughts on the subject – in making the initial computers available to some of the poorer socio-economic groups, into communities where libraries had been shut down because of a lack of interest, and little or no funding, the computers have enabled more people to gain the benefit of the world of information. And surely that has got to be a good thing. *Libraries, Wired and Reborn* by Steve Lohr. *The New York Times*, April 2, 2004, and *Toward Equality of Access: The Role of Public Libraries in Addressing the Digital Divide* – copies available from (yes you guessed it) – <http://www.gatesfoundation.org>

As always we hope this has generated a little bit of interest in the topic, and we hope you enjoyed reading.

A T hought to Ponder:

"A single moment of understanding can flood a whole life with meaning"

Anonymous

Your comments and suggestions on the subject of this newsletter are most welcome. Or if you would like to see other issues covered in future editions, please email me at training@iea.com.au.

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