

Meeting the digital challenge: managing your personal information

Here are 10 strategies for managing your personal and family digital information, keeping it for the long term and preventing data loss.

1. Know what your valuable information is

Unlike paper records, digital information will need active management and protection to ensure it survives for as long as you need it.

By knowing what your important family information is you can make plans to ensure it is protected and managed and accessible for as long as you need it.

2. Know what digital systems, apps and formats you use and where your information is

Information today is stored in multiple locations, formats, apps and systems. Knowing where your important information is and what formats it is in will help you to plan for how you are going to sustain it through time.

If some of your information is stored in the cloud, check the terms and conditions of your cloud storage contracts. Make sure you can always export your information, and export it in a format you can use. You should also document where your information is stored, so that others can locate it if needed.

Also, if passwords are used to protect your cloud storage, wikis or social media accounts, make a record of these for others to use if necessary so that important family information is not lost.

3. Be careful when you choose systems, devices and apps

Make sure that any systems or apps you use have export functionality – that is, that they let you take your information out of the system, device or app and import it into another system, device or app if you need to.

4. Don't use storage devices for long term management

Storage devices such as floppy disks, video tapes, CDs or USBs should not be used for long term storage. Technology evolves quickly and new devices are often unable to read older storage mediums, or they may not have the software needed to open the information on your older storage device.

If you use storage devices, check them regularly to ensure your information is still accessible. Also, if you change technology, make sure you move your information to a new system or storage environment that is compatible with your new technology.

5. Regularly destroy digital information you no longer need

Keeping all your digital information indefinitely is potentially very complex.

By regularly destroying time-expired information, you can focus on protecting and managing your key information that is of long term value.

Don't keep a huge digital legacy that you plan to sift through 'one day'. The chances are you will never get time to do this and your family never will either. Instead folders will just be deleted and precious family information will be lost. Be strategic and prioritise now, delete what you don't need and protect your important information.

6. Use back ups for back up, not storage

Back up is vitally important for ensuring you have copies of your information if your system crashes or your device is stolen. But your back up will generally run on a certain version of software and will be enabled for a particular form of hardware. It therefore serves immediate disaster management purposes, not long term recordkeeping objectives.

If you want to keep certain information for long periods of time, don't trust it to back up tapes or systems. Instead migrate your information into your new systems, software and devices and keep it accessible in your new operating environment. And back it up there too!

7. Describe your information well

Digital information needs to be described well so it can be found, used and understood.

- Use good clear titles.
- Make sure everything has a date.
- Take time to label photographs.
- Make it clear what collections of information relate to, e.g. give folders on your network clear, meaningful titles.
- Add lots of descriptive tags to your family information to add extra value, categorising and search capacity.

8. Develop a social media strategy

If you actively use social media to share significant family information, you should consider making and keeping records of your social media activities.

While they are stable platforms, social media systems are not recordkeeping systems. Various free online tools are available to regular harvest your social media feeds and make records of them. By proactively using these tools you can keep ongoing records of your social media activities. See State Records' Future Proof blog for more social media recordkeeping advice.

9. Be aware that change is constant

Technology will always evolve, so always be alert to changes and how they might impact your important information.

10. Think long term

We all want our archives to survive into the future. Ensuring the survival of your digital records will take awareness and active management, so take charge of your digital information today and manage its survival into the future.

Thinking strategically and long term from the start will put your information in the best possible position to survive.