

Retention and Disposition Policies Could Soon Become Irrelevant

Save to myBoK

By Mary Butler

As the costs associated with data storage and storage infrastructure continue to shrink—thanks to innovations such as cloud computing—individuals who manage records for a living must accept a new reality: destroying information and setting retention schedules will soon be more expensive than “digital [data hoarding](#)” and keeping records forever. This controversial sentiment was expressed in a presentation Wednesday morning at the National Conference on Managing Electronic Records, taking place this week in Chicago, IL.

Barclay T. Blair, president of ViaLumina and founder and executive director of the Information Governance Initiative made the statement during his presentation “When Keeping Everything Forever is Possible: Implications on RIM and Information Governance.” Blair acknowledged that his discussion would be considered “radical” or “heretical” by some in the IG community.

“The painful irony is that this is the world as it exists. No organization of any size is getting rid of information... The people who matter [in organizations] don’t believe in retention schedules, don’t trust them,” Blair said. “We went from a world where we were accidentally keeping things forever, and now we’re doing it intentionally.”

He noted that this is even happening in healthcare, despite the fact that privacy and security officers are concerned that information hoarding puts protected health information (PHI) at risk. Blair said one hospital executive recently told him that “retention regulations are irrelevant because I want to keep this data forever.”

In a question and answer session following his remarks, an audience member who works in the pharmaceutical industry countered that healthcare organizations get dinged by regulators for storing data with PHI for too long, adding that there are benefits to encouraging employees not to hoard data.

“Give me credit, I understand all that,” Blair said in response. “The question is, ‘Are those concerns going to slow down this train?’ I see no evidence that it will. I literally think we’re moving to a place where it’ll cost more to get rid of it than keep it.”

A Historical Perspective on Records Management

To grapple with how the era of digital records will impact those working to implement information governance policies, Blair said it’s important to look at data management anxieties in the past.

Blair shared examples from academic journals from 1968 where industries were worried about a “data explosion”—a time when there were only paper records and no corporate IT infrastructure. Another academic article expressed fears about a “data explosion” in hospitals from 1979, which is about the time ICD-9 was implemented.

As Blair pointed out, privacy officers warned that the entrance of e-mail and smartphones in the workplace would infiltrate the enterprise with risk, but those sentiments didn’t prevent e-mail from becoming ubiquitous.

He noted that the same concerns are being repeated today by those warning about the consequences of a flood of information.

“It’s not a flood [of data]. It’s not a tsunami. It’s a permanent change in the high water mark. We have to stop beating the drum that this has to stop, that it’s a disaster,” Blair said.

The key to keeping businesses from getting overwhelmed by the very real growth of electronic information—as well as existing information on paper—is by championing the creation of chief information governance officers (CIGOs), and putting

IG in the C-suite.

“So what can you do? Become part of the team that does something about it... Put yourself in the center of that team and position yourself as a governor,” Blair emphasized.

Mary Butler is the associate editor at The Journal of AHIMA.

Original source:

Butler, Mary. "Retention and Disposition Policies Could Soon Become Irrelevant" ([Journal of AHIMA website](#)), May 20, 2015.

Driving the Power of Knowledge

Copyright 2022 by The American Health Information Management Association. All Rights Reserved.