

# Educating Donors: A First Step Towards Meeting the Challenges of Acquiring Digital Records in Small Archives

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Archivists working at small and medium-sized archives will have to think outside the box if they are to preserve community memories created and maintained digitally. Digital records are fragile and their preservation requires early intervention and planning. Community records are traditionally donated to archives years after the end of their usefulness. Although this was an acceptable practice in the paper world, the records stored on hard drives squirreled away in attics will not last.

## BACKGROUND

North Vancouver Museum & Archives (NVMA) is a small community repository responsible for documenting life in North Vancouver. Archivist Janet Turner observed that, recently, an increased interest in and awareness of the challenges of digital preservation have created a demand on NVMA to provide information to community members about the management and preservation of digital records. In its role as a community repository, NVMA provides significant outreach to individuals and volunteer organizations through various programs including the "Family Recordkeeper" workshop. Unfortunately, the majority of literature devoted to this subject is not accessible for laymen.

InterPARES graduate research assistants Shamin Malmas and Cindy McLellan worked with Turner to create a series of outreach brochures. Turner will incorporate these guidelines into the "Family Recordkeeper" workshop and make the brochures available to potential donors.

The series of brochures we created communicates in layman's terms practical steps individuals, families, volunteer organizations and small businesses can take to start the process of preserving their digital records. The four brochures are:

- *Maintaining Your Digital Records*
- *Maintaining Digital Records: The Business Edition*
- *Managing Email*
- *Consider Donating Your Records to the North Vancouver Museum and Archives*

In this poster we present only the first brochure; however, all four are available for free download and customization from the InterPARES Web site at [http://www.interpares.org/ip3/ip3\\_products.cfm?item=1](http://www.interpares.org/ip3/ip3_products.cfm?item=1).

## CONCLUSIONS

As recordkeeping experts, archivists can help community members preserve their digital memories. Such relationships will make the acquisition of digital records easier.

For small and medium-sized archives archival outreach is only one step on the road toward preserving digital memories. With community awareness and a solid collections policy in place it is much easier to request the other, more costly, necessities: the expertise, the software and the hardware.

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## Maintaining Your Digital Records

**These guidelines have been developed to help individuals and small volunteer organizations understand and preserve their digital records. The preservation of digital records requires more planning and periodic intervention than is necessary for traditional records. This guide offers practical advice and tips that can be applied with minimal resources. If your well-cared-for records find their way into an archival repository, the community as a whole will also benefit, and so will posterity.**

### Step 1: Appoint a Trusted Custodian

This person will take responsibility for the overall care of all your records after you are no longer able to, particularly those that you identify as vital. This can be a family member, the secretary of your organization or the community archivist. In some cases, the trusted custodian could be the records creator.

### Step 2: Take Charge of Your Records

Create a document that explains how they are organized. This may be a document that outlines how you label your family photos and explains how your documents are filed in named folders. Make sure this document is updated and known to your trusted custodian.

Create another document outlining how your records are stored. List the digital records formats you use and for what purposes you use them.

- Do you have important information on floppy disks? How old are they? Are you still able to access that information?
- Do you have CDs? Are they gold standard?
- Formats include: DOCX, JPEG, MP3, and PDF.

List details of the software and hardware you are using, and keep the original documentation or manuals.

Make a plan for changes that should be made within the next few years (see Step 4 Preventing Loss for more information).

### Warning!

Heat, light, and moisture are all enemies of long-term digital storage media. Store your digital media in a cool, dark, dry area to prolong their lifespan.

### Step 3: Plan for Hardware and Software Obsolescence

Software and hardware typically become obsolete after five years. To help avoid losing your records it is important to:

Frequently upgrade the technology you use to create and maintain your records.

Keep the document outlining the storage of your digital records up-to-date.

### Avoid Obscure Formats!

Using obscure (non-standard) formats increases preservation risks, as their technical support may quickly disappear. As part of knowing your records, plan to move from non-standard, to de facto standards. Some well known and widely used computer file formats that are considered de facto standards include PDF, TIFF, DOCX, MP3.

### Step 4: Preventing Loss

If your hard drive crashes you could lose all your family photographs or records vital to you as an individual and/or for the daily operations of your organization. Preventing the loss of digital records may be avoided by ensuring you have a safety copy of your computer files. There are several ways to do this:

Purchase an external hard drive (\$100-\$200) and copy all of your important documents.

Use a USB Key (\$20-\$50) to make and keep copies of your most valuable documents.

Back up regularly! Have a schedule.

### Things to Consider!

**Location of Safety Copy:** Consider pairing up with a friend; update regularly together and swap safety copies in case of fire. You may want to have two safety copies: one on an external hard drive or one on a USB key stored in a safe location, like a safety deposit box, or fire proof safe.

**Life of Safety Copy:** Technology does not remain stable. It is important to keep updating your safety devices. USB keys and other storage devices may break and the information on them will degrade overtime.

**Security:** Digital records are very susceptible to accidental, unauthorized or malicious alteration. To help safeguard your records against these hazards, consider saving your finalized documents in widely used stable, hard to modify, file formats like PDF, so they remain accessible over time and cannot be accidentally changed.

**Avoid Lossy Compression:** Some file formats use lossy compression to store items at a smaller file size than the original (JPEG is a common format that uses lossy compression). Instead, consider saving your photographs using TIFF.

**E-Mail:** In pre-digital times bundles of letters were treasured and handed down to future generations; currently, there is a different attitude towards correspondence and e-mails are not kept in the same way. Consider printing, or saving outside your e-mail host, correspondence of special significance (tales of a daughter's travels or letters from the cousin in Afghanistan).