Keeping Found Things Found: Our Challenge in the age of the Information Tsunami

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A colleague, John Gillies[1] at Cassels Brock, introduced me to the book “Keeping Found Things Found” earlier this year (Jones 2008). This book should be a key reference for information professionals. The book’s subtitle, “The study and practice of information management”, says it all. Information Management (IM) and Knowledge Management (KM) are often used as interchangeable terms, implying that information and knowledge are equivalent. But consider a distinction made by John Seely Brown -- we say to people “I sent you the information, did you get it?”, but we would not say “I sent you the knowledge, did you get it?”[2]

Information Management has roots that go back to the seventies and eighties with proponents like James Martin.[3] At that time, the concept emerged that information is an important corporate resource and needs to be treated as such, even though it is an intangible. Information exists at many levels in our organizations – personal, group, enterprise-wide, intra-organizational. Herein lies part of the dilemma: There are tradeoffs to be made when managing information at any of these levels. Personal information management may introduce practices that run counter to organizational IM. Notwithstanding this issue, there may well be benefits to improving our management of personal information.

William Jones (the author) and his colleagues embarked on a comprehensive research project to examine and recommend best practices for personal information management. The Keeping Found Things Found™ initiative undertook a number of related projects. When most of us think about Personal Information Management (PIM) we call to mind the various software products that adopted this label over the years. These products often included things like to-do lists, calendars, contacts, and email. However, Jones’ view of PIM is not limited by the constraints of these packages – he takes a much broader view of this application space.

Jones uses the results from this research undertaking as the basis for the book. He provides guidance for how we might go about managing our personal information. He describes the activities most of us carry out to manage our personal information. He presents solutions using an array of tools from email to the web. And he presents (as conclusions) frameworks for PIM practice, associated tools and his vision of what the future might hold for us.

His research provides a number of explanations about why we do things the way we do them. We use email to organize ourselves because it is what we know, it is easy, and it is convenient. We are reluctant to give up our folders. We have taken this paper-world metaphor into the digital world and use folders as a way of visualizing related information. Concepts like tagging, embraced by Google as an alternative to folders, are not as popular. They may well be with the next generation as they grow up without filing cabinets. Frankly, folders in the digital world may be as absurd as using the floppy disk as icon for “saving” a file. Both are carryovers from an old paradigm.

Jones points out that organizing and finding are not solo activities but rather two sides of a coin. We organize stuff so we can find it later and, more importantly, in organizations so others can find things (think Document and Content Management System). Increasingly, more of what we do is organized in groups and teams. While the focus is personal information management, our challenge is to extract
lessons from this work and place it in the frame of group or corporate / firm IM. Very little work is personal today other than a job application or dissertation.

Jones talks about creating a ‘Personal Space of Information’. He says our information space can at times be more real than the physical world in which we operate. He offers a framework for organizing information in this space that introduces the concept of mapping between information and need. He tackles a number of topics including organizing information for future use; managing privacy and the flow of information; and sensemaking (making sense of things). He also provides guidance for information professionals involved with tool development.

Jones presents some thoughtful analysis in the chapter on email. He challenges us to think about ways of integrating email into other modes of communication (e.g. telephone, instant messaging). Email has become the environment in which most people live for a large portion of the workday and yet it is not an optimal tool. Email often brings reference material, corporate records, and tasks (often more than one in a single email). All of this is dumped into the email pile with the only form of organization for most users being folders. Jones challenges us to find ways to link email with other tools such as wikis and discussion forums.

So why is IM a technical issue? Users in our firms may get out ahead of the technology, introducing a plethora of tools for personal purposes. When IT leads in introducing tools and frameworks, we will have a better, more cohesive solution in the long run. Good IM is a prerequisite for good KM.

The KFTF website [4] also provides other related resources and some background on the various projects undertaken under this initiative. It is worth browsing on its own – even if you don’t read the book.

Our challenge is to find ways to move forward with PIM. Even though current software offerings are early stage solutions to PIM problems, we cannot wait and hope for software vendors to provide the “proverbial golden shovel” and bail us out of this problem. Read the book. You will find strategies you can adopt personally or, with adaptation, will support others.

Reference List


