

Radio Days – 2012-11-03

Discussion – Keep Your Data Up To Date

I have often spoken about keeping your programs and hardware up to date. There is another side to this discussion: keeping data up to date. Just as your programs become superseded by later versions so your data can become outdated.

Many people may remember a variant of this when they received a Word document in the new format created when Word 2007 was released. They were unable to open the document until they either downloaded the update to enable earlier versions of Word to read this new format or they downloaded the new Word reader program.

There are many people who are using old programs who have lost the CD (or even diskettes!) needed to reinstall their program on their new computer. All the documents created with these old programs will now become unreadable. This can be a major problem, especially for large organisations like government departments which need to be able to read documents created years, or even centuries, before.

You will be aware of old documents created on stone or clay which are still readable today, a few millennia after these documents were created. Archaeologists can read and translate clay tablets from old sites in countries like Egypt, Iraq and Israel. Will the same be true in another thousand years when the electronics and electronic circuits in today's hard discs have become dust and ashes.

Perhaps this is an extreme example, so let me use a more recent example.

I was asked to help a client extract the text from a Microsoft Works document just before a wedding because the person who created the document had an old program but was unable to finish the job. In the time available I was only able to find scraps of text because of the urgency of the task. This was cobbled together well enough that the wedding could go ahead.

Later, when the urgency was over, I was able to find a program on the internet which could convert the document's Works format to the latest version of Word. This was enough to get both the text and formatting correct, but it was too late to get to the wedding in time.

While this may appear to be an extreme example of losing both the contents and the format of a document please imagine what would happen if the responsible government department could not print a new copy of a land title to prove that you owned that parcel of land and so were entitled to sell it.

If this sort of error occurred on a large scale the whole country would come to a complete halt in a very short time.

Olden Documents

Old documents were created on paper with ink which did not fade. This made them easy to read, even centuries after they were created. These old documents could then be transferred to computer files and reprinted at will. They could also be searched in ways that were not easy to do with paper.

Also, if the paper lasted, then these paper documents would last for ever.

The same is true for documents stored on computer. If the medium and the electronics could last then the information stored on a computer could, at least in theory, last for ever. Just as the inscriptions written on clay tablets and stone obelisks can, in theory, be deciphered for all time so too the bits stored on a computer's hard disc or optical medium can be deciphered by generations far into the future.

The problem arises when a computer document has lost its program.

This was the case for so many people and organisations in decades past. As an example, can you remember the olden days of DOS computers using WordPerfect as a word processing

program? I can, and I can also remember the agony of those who had created documents which were legally or personally important.

These documents were almost lost when the creators had moved on from WordPerfect to Lotus' Ami Pro to Microsoft's Word. Later versions of Word could no longer read any of the documents created in earlier programs. There were, however, programs which could extract the text from some older documents.

Just having the text was enough for some documents. A letter can be recreated if you just had the text, but so many documents are more than just text. Can you imagine a child's picture book which had lost the pictures but you could just retrieve the words? Try, if you will, to imagine a book like *The Cat In The Hat* without the pictures!

This is the dilemma presented by computers when they start storing important documents but have no way of ensuring that these documents will be readable in years or centuries. This is the dilemma which we will face if we do not have standard ways of storing documents on a computer.

Governments and other large organisations are now facing the problem of long-term storage and retrieval of documents. For most people the thought of how to read a document stored on computer is not a serious one. I have spoken of the need to store electronic documents on a second medium as a backup. This is the time to speak of the horrors of having a document available but not being able to access it because the program which created it has been lost.

This problem was brought home to me during the week because a client had an old computer which was to be replaced. All my client's documents were created using an old program called Microsoft Works. Microsoft Works is an older office suite which was used by many people last century. It was about as basic as you could get and was almost usable. If you have ever tried the free Microsoft program which comes with Windows called WordPad you will have some idea just how bad Works is to use.

The problem was how to get all his old Works documents across to his new computer which did not have Works. We could not install Works on the new computer because he had lost the floppy discs which had stored the Works program. Even if he had found these floppy discs we would not have been able to install them on his new computer because it, like all modern computers, does not have a floppy disc drive!

After some searching on the net we discovered how to convert all his old Works documents to Microsoft Word format so that he could continue to use them. They had been a part of his business since the beginning and he could not imagine life without them. In fact, had we not been able to convert them the world as we know it would have come to a painful end!

There are a number of programs which purport to do the needed conversion but, as so often happens, the reality does not match the hype. This proved to be the case for my client.

We then had to convert all his documents manually to ensure that each one was able to be used in his business. After conversion, these documents were almost usable, but each one still had to be tidied up in Word on the new computer. This was yet another long day!

Keeping Programs

All this points to the need for each computer user to keep all the program discs which come with a new computer or are bought or downloaded after the computer arrives. This is because you never know when you will need to reinstall a program. Reinstalling a program is easy if you have the original disc in good condition and your computer has a drive which can read that disc. All modern computers have a CD reader, most have a DVD reader but very few have a diskette reader for really old programs. Also, even if a computer does have a diskette reader, it may not be able to read the diskette because the diskette has lost the ability to store magnetic information.

I have also regularly been asked to read a program stored on a CD which has been thrown into a drawer and scratched. These discs can sometimes be read if you can repair the surface but a much better approach is to store CDs in cases to prevent the scratches in the first place.

There is nothing like a new computer to make people realise just how vulnerable and precious their data and programs are! I have seen grown men and women cry because they did not realise just how much they had come to rely on their computer. They may curse and swear during its life but, at the crunch time of replacement, they realise that their computer has got its revenge at the end.

If I can get you to remember some simple rules they are:

- Keep all the discs which came with your new computer, and ensure that they are in good condition for when you need them
- Keep all the programs which you download from the internet both on your computer and on your backups
- Keep a copy of all the programs which you borrowed from friends in case they have not read and kept these rules
- Make sure that your data is held in a format which can be read by modern programs which might replace your old program. if necessary this may mean going through all your documents and updating them to the new format

If you can do all this you will be in a very small minority. You will also be able to move all your programs and data from an old computer to a new one with the minimum of fuss. It can take hours to setup a new computer with the data and programs used on an old computer: make the job easier by ensuring that you have all the needed resources at hand before you start.

Further Information

None this week.