IV in PIM: The applicability of Intrinsic Value in Personal Information Management

**1. Introduction**

Information Management is a term with strong associations with Computing. However, in practice, it is a topic which Librarians and Archivists have been dealing with for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. ***Personal*** Information Management, however, is a newer kid on the block, growing up within a fast expanding world of email, laptops, mobile phones, text messaging, tablets and social media systems. It is something that most of us grapple with, knowingly or unknowingly, everyday. Jones defines Personal Information Management (PIM) as referring to *“both the practice and study of the activities a person performs in order to locate or create, store, organize, maintain, modify, retrieve, use and distribute information in each of its many forms (in various paper forms, in electronic documents, in email messages, in conventional Web pages, in blogs, in wikis, etc.) as needed to meet life’s many goals (everyday and long-term, work-related and not) and to fulfill life’s many roles and responsibilities (as parent, spouse, friend, employee, member of community, etc.)”* (Jones, 2007)

Much of the information that we deal with today is electronic, however, a significant percentage starts out in a physical form which we then digitise to reap the advantages of improved organisation, search, retrieval and interrogation afforded by modern computer systems. For example, old photographs and paper documents can be digitised using a scanner; and we can take digital photographs of physical objects. At the point of digitisation, however, a dilemma arises: should we retain or destroy the original?

It was to answer a similar question that the US National Archives and Records Service (NARS) formed a Committee on Intrinsic Value in 1979 following a request by the General Services Administration (GSA) to microfilm all its records and destroy the originals. NARS felt compelled to "rebut the assumption that all records were disposable,"(McRanor, 1996). The report it produced defines Intrinsic Value to be “the archival term that is applied to permanently valuable records that have qualities and characteristics that make the records in their original physical form the only archivally acceptable form for preservation”. It goes on to identify the following nine qualities or characteristics, the possession of any one of which denotes that a record has Intrinsic Value (NARS, 1982):

1. Physical form that may be the subject for study if the records provide meaningful documentation or significant examples of the form
2. Aesthetic or artistic quality
3. Unique or curious physical features
4. Age that provides a quality of uniqueness
5. Value for use in exhibits
6. Questionable authenticity, date, author, or other characteristic that is significant and ascertainable by physical examination
7. General and substantial public interest because of direct association with famous or historically significant people, places, things, issues, or events
8. Significance as documentation of the establishment or continuing legal basis of an agency or institution
9. Significance as documentation of the formulation of policy at the highest executive levels when the policy has significance and broad effect throughout or beyond the agency or institution

The NARS document was a landmark report for Archivists since it came at the start of an era when the combination of rapidly improving digitisation hardware and software, and plummeting costs, made digitisation an increasingly desirable option for Archivists to consider. Since then a few adjustments have been proposed for the characteristics but essentially they remain an important basis for many Archivists when considering the retention or destruction of originals.

Within the PIM arena, no such guidance exists and little discussion of the topic can be found in the literature. Therefore, it would seem sensible not to re-invent the wheel, but instead to see if the notion of Intrinsic Value from the Archival domain can be usefully and effectively employed within the PIM domain. This paper, then, sets out to answer the following questions:

1. Do those undertaking PIM need a way of deciding whether to retain or destroy physical artefacts they have digitised?
2. Is the notion of Intrinsic Value applicable within the PIM domain?
3. Do the Intrinsic Value characteristics need adjusting in any way to enable them to be used effectively within the PIM domain?

To explore these questions the paper will consider the retain/destroy decisions made by one of the authors for two of his personal collections – a ‘Job Documents’ collection and a collection of ‘Mementos’. The aim is to provide insights which can be used to inform subsequent, wider, more generalisable studies by other researchers.

**2. Method**

The investigation will make use of two sets of material: a collection of job documents built up over the last 40 years and comprising mainly paper originals but including a significant number of items that originated in electronic form; and a collection of personal mementos from the period 1958 – 1972 comprising mainly paper items but also including some physical objects. Both collections have been digitised by scanning or photographing the paper originals, and by photographing the objects. However, while the digitisation work has been completed for the Mementos collection, approximately 5% of the Job Documents collection has yet to be digitised.

Three studies of retain/destroy decisions will be made across the two collections. First, for the Job Documents, a previous categorisation of ‘Reasons for not destroying the paper’ (RFND criteria), made before the owner was aware of the NARS Intrinsic Value report, will be compared with the NARS Intrinsic Value (IV) characteristics. The second study will use the NARS characteristics as the starting point for making retain/destroy decisions in the process of digitising the remaining 840 items in the Job Documents collection. The third study will use the NARS characteristics as the starting point for categorising the retain/destroy decisions that have already been made for the whole of the Mementos collection.

**2.1 The collections**

**2.1.1 The Job Documents collection**

The JobDocuments collection is organised by each document having a serial number (e.g. 3010) and a sub-serial number (e.g. 01). So, a typical serial number/sub-serial number looks like this: 3010/01. The purpose of the serial number is to enable new documents to be given the next number on the list, i.e. the number signifies nothing other than the physical location of the document in the file. The purpose of the sub-serial number is to enable two or more documents to be kept physically together in a file if thought appropriate by the owner. Numbers are written in blue felt tip pen at the top right hand corner of physical documents. Each document in the collection is given an entry in an Index held in a Filemaker database. Digitised versions of documents are held in a Document Management System called Fish and owned by a UK company called M-Hance. The Index is integrated with the Document Management System by way of control key combinations which, when selected within Filemaker, copy specified information on the screen, import it into Fish and enact a Fish action such as searching for a document or creating a new entry (Wilson, 2000). The Index and digitised documents are held on a laptop. The paper documents are held in file boxes – three boxes of retained documents, and four boxes of documents that have yet to be digitised.

As at the beginning of August 2012, the overall collection comprised approximately 17060 separate Index entries, comprising some Y paper pages and Z electronic files (note that each digitised page has its own file in the Document Management System, i.e. a twenty page document when digitised would have twenty separate electronic files).

The collection contains a very diverse range of material including memos, reports, manuals, working papers, presentations, meeting minutes, publications, articles, standards documents, brochures, marketing material, travel documents, maps, conference materials etc.. They reflect the working life of the owner in the topic he got a degree in (Ergonomics and Human Factors), in the area in which the owner worked (Information Technology), and in the four organisations he was employed.

Digitisation of the paper originals started in 1995, some fourteen years after the collection was initiated. All of the paper originals have been scanned apart from four boxes (comprising some X thousand pages) as at the start of this study. Of the X paper originals(comprising some Y thousand pages) that have already been reviewed as part of the digitisation process, 357 of them (comprising R thousand pages) have been retained.

**2.1.2 The Mementos collection**

The Mementos collection is organised by each item having serial number and sub-serial number as described in section 2.1.1 above for the Job Documents collection. However the Mementos collection is not supported by Document Management software. Instead, it has an Index in an Excel spreadsheet and the digitised items are held in a single folder within the Windows file management system. The title of each electronic file starts with the serial number, thereby enabling a particular digitised document to be found by identifying the serial number in the Excel Index and then searching within the Windows folder.

Before the collection was organised and digitised it resided in folders in three boxes, as shown in Figure X. Starting in November 2012, each item was examined and a decision taken as to whether to keep it in the collection or whether to exclude it. The items which were kept were then digitised and a decision taken as to whether to retain the original or not. This process was completed before the owner became aware of the NARS Intrinsic Value characteristics.

In order to try and understand why people keep mementos, a full record was kept of all the decisions made, and the reasons they were made, throughout this process. The record was made in an Excel spreadsheet called “Wish List” with the headings shown in Figure X.

The Mementos collection contains a hugely diverse range of items reflecting the interests and activities of an individual over the period from when he was an 8 year old boy to a 30 year old man. It includes school calendars, school play programmes, exam papers, team sheets, sports programmes, membership cards, payslips, drillbits, tickets, theatre programmes, booklets of matches, scribbled notes, party invitations, cardboard novelties etc.. Much of it is paper-based – but some are physical artefacts such as the rejected drillbits from a holiday job as a lathe operator.

**2.2 The Studies**

**2.2.1 The Job Documents retain/destroy decision review study**

This study compares the IV characteristics with previously designated RFND criteria’ for items in the Job Documents collection which had been retained after digitising before the work described in this paper was started. The digitisation of these documents started in 1995 and the RFND designations were made in September 2013 at which point there were some 357 retained items comprising some Y pages. When performing the designation exercise, the owner had no knowledge of the NARS IV characteristics. Therefore, this provides an opportunity to test the IV characteristics against a genuinely different point of view.

The analysis of RFND criteria was undertaken at the suggestion of Ann O’Brien as a precursor to starting work on a paper on “The artefact in the digital age” (which has now been transformed into the current paper). A very rapid analysis was performed by assessing each of the retained documents in turn and making rough notes on why it had not been destroyed after digitisation. When all the items had been assessed, the notes were reviewed, similar notes grouped together, overlaps eliminated by either creating new groups or moving a reason between groups, doing a final refinement and finally defining each criteria in words. The final set of RFND criteria was then used to create a list of which criteria applied to each of the 357 retained items (the RFND item list). The nineteen categories of RFND criteria that emerged from this process are shown in Figure X.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1 | You get a better appreciation of it if it’s on paper |
| 2 | This is the original bit of paper which I might want to frame, bind, or just get the touch and feel of |
| 3 | This is an A3 document which looks better on paper and I don't have an A3 printer |
| 4 | Designed to be put to use in paper or laminated format  |
| 5 | Needs to be scanned in colour and at the time I didn't have a colour capability |
| 6 | A booklet/newsletter which has a phyiscal look and feel which needs to be handled and flicked through to fully appreciate it and which you can't experience just by looking at the scanned image on screent |
| 7 | Paper retained after scanning (or scanning put of till another day) because I thought I might want to make use of the document downstream or show it to others and would want to have it in paper form while I was using it |
| 8 | Documents of some significance which are retained in their original form because it is only the actual artefact that can be claimed to be the actual item |
| 9 | Documents which I believed to have particular significance at the time but don't any longer |
| 10 | Published documents which mention myself or people I know |
| 11 | Waiting for the PDF version to become available so that I can store that and destroy the paper version |
| 12 | This is a large document which needs photographing to retain it as an integral document in digital format |
| 13 | Legal dcoument for which I believe the original is required |
| 14 | Needed to quickly file these and do the time consuming scanning job at a later date |
| 15 | Documents which are of significance to myself and which I want to have a paper copy to hand to make it a more visible and tangible item |
| 16 | Decision to scan these items was made after they had been included in the hardcopy box, but haven't got round to doing it yet |
| 17 | Hardcopy retained until time can be found to separate items within it to be scanned and thrown away from artefacts to be retained  |
| 18 | Retained until I could do a 'really high quality' B&W scan  |
| 19 | Contains a diverse set of material which you wouldn't get the feel for if it was just scanned documents on a screen |

**Figure X - Reasons for not destroying the paper (RFND) criteria**

The decision review study will be undertaken by placing each retained item on a desk in turn, reviewing its index entry, noting which, if any, of the IV characteristics were the reason(s) for it having been retained, and also noting any other reasons that it was retained. With this process complete, the newly completed IV Item List will be compared with RFND item list to identify matches, partial matches and no matches between the IV characteristics and the RFND criteria, for each item.

**2.2.2 The Job Documents digitisation study**

This study will assess newly digitised documents against first, the IV characteristics, and second the RFND criteria, in order to decide whether to retain or destroy the paper originals. The documents concerned are all those from the Job Documents collection which have yet to be digitised. They comprise 238 items consisting of Y pages.

Each item will be taken in turn, digitised and then assessed against the IV characteristics. Any of the IV characteristics which apply will be noted. The item will then be assessed against the RFND criteria and any that apply will be noted. If the two assessments have identified a reason for retaining the original the item will be retained. Any additional reason for retaining the item will be noted. If none of the IV characteristics or RFRND criteria apply, a final assessment will be made to decide whether the original should be retained or destroyed. If the final assessment determines that the original should be retained, the new reason for retention will be noted. If no reasons have been identified for retaining the original, it will be destroyed.

When this process has been completed for all the items, the records made for all the retained items will be reviewed to identify a) matches between the IV characteristics and the RFND criteria, b) commonly occurring groupings of IV characteristics and RFND criteria which seem to occur in decisions to retain originals, and c) new reasons for retaining originals.

**2.2.3 The Memento retain/destroy decision review study**

This study will review the decisions to retain or dispose of all the items in the Memento collection as recorded in the Memento collection’s so-called Wish List. Each item on the list will first be assessed against the IV characteristics and any that apply will be noted. The item will then be assessed against the RFND criteria and any that apply will be noted. If neither of these two assessments identify a reason for retaining the item, and the original had in fact been disposed of, no further analysis will be undertaken on this item. If, however, the two assessments identify a reason for retaining the original but it had, in fact, been disposed of, a note will be made as to why the original had not been retained. If the two assessments had not identified a need to retain the original, but it had, in fact, been retained, then a note will be made as to why the original had been retained. If the two assessments had identified a reason for retaining the original and it had, in fact, been retained, an assessment will be made of why it had been retained and any reason not already on the IV list or the ‘Reasons for not destroying the paper’ list, will be noted.

Once this process has been completed for every item on the Wish List, the records made for all the items will be reviewed to identify a) matches between the IV characteristics and the RFND criteria, b) commonly occurring groupings of IV characteristics and RFND criteria which seem to occur in decisions to retain originals, and c) new reasons for retaining originals.

**2.3 Analysis of the Studies**

The findings of all three studies will be reviewed to identify a) a single consolidated set of criteria for retaining originals in PIM collections similar to the Job Documents collection, b) a single consolidated set of criteria for retaining originals in PIM collections similar to the Mementos collection, and c) whether it is feasible to have a single consolidated set of criteria for retaining originals in all types of PIM collections.

**3 Findings**

**4 Discussion**

**5 Conclusions**

**6** **References**

Jones, W. (2007) **Keeping Found Things Found: The Study and Practice of Personal Information Management**. San Francisco, CA: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers. Cited on page(s) 3, 22, 25, 27, 39

McRanor, S. (1996) **A critical analysis of intrinsic value.** American Archivist, 59(4), 400-411.

Metters, Jane C. (2011) **Digitization for Preservation and Effects on Intrinsic Value.** A Master’s Paper for the M.S. in L.S. degree. 64 pages.

NARS, (1982) **Intrinsic Value in Archival Material**, Staff Information Paper Number 21, Web version at <http://www.archives.gov/research/alic/reference/archives-resources/archival-material-intrinsic-value.html>

Wilson (2000) **20 years in the life of a long-term empirical personal electronic filing study**, Behaviour & Information Technology, 2001, Vol. 20, No. 5, 395-409