Book Review:
Making Sense of Documents in the Digital Age

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RIM professionals are skilled in managing documents. We organize them, store them, retrieve them, and otherwise help to manage their lifecycles. But rarely do we reflect upon them. What are they? What purposes do they serve? What will be their fate in the digital world?

In *Scrolling Forward: Making Sense of Documents in the Digital Age*, David Levy reflects upon the nature of documents and illustrates both the continuity and the differences between earlier documents and their newer, digital counterparts. He also demonstrates that the effects of digital technologies on documents, as well as on our writing and reading habits, are analogous to the impacts of earlier technologies (e.g., the printing press) on the documents used by our ancestors.

Scrolling Forward is a well-written and thoroughly researched treatise on the role of documents in society. The author defines documents as "talking things" and asserts that documents speak for us while acting on our behalf and in our absence. Using the deceptively simple example of a cash register receipt, the author describes the many roles that a document can play. Those roles include serving as a historical document (a snapshot of something that happened), a "proof of purchase," and as an agent in mankind's efforts to transcend death and achieve immortality. The author also examines the characteristics of documents and illustrates how they can be both fixed and fluid, thereby debunking the common belief that the inherent difference between paper and digital documents is the fact that paper documents are fixed while digital documents are fluid.

Chapter four is of particular interest to RIM professionals because it traces the evolution of mankind's use of documents for administrative purposes to regulate institutional and personal practices (the discipline otherwise known as "records management," although the author does not use that term). In addition to celebrating this role, chapter four also explores what the author terms the "abusive side of documents" because humans often feel trapped in a tangle of paperwork and bureaucratic red tape. The chapter concludes with brief histories of three technologies

(the typewriter, carbon paper, and vertical files) and illustrates how those technologies provided the speed, efficiency, and control desired by businesses in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when records management was emerging as a specialized field.

In his attempt to make sense of documents in the digital age, Levy examines the basic architecture of digital documents, discusses the fate of the personal letter in the age of electronic communication, and examines the different perspectives in the ongoing debate on the future of the book. The author also asserts the need to better organize digital documents that are inherently susceptible to loss (e.g., Web pages disappear) and explores our lack of trust in digital documents given their deteriora-

tion over time and the ease with which they can be altered.

In the final chapter, Levy concludes that the increasing use of digital documents should be seen as an alternative, not as a threat, to the continued use of documents in other formats. Although the author does not answer questions such as whether books will go away, he illustrates that such questions are really "expressions of concern for the character and quality of our lives" because humans need balance in our society characterized by the "search for ever-greater speed and efficiency." The author firmly believes

"It isn't a question, it needn't be a question, of books or the Web, of letters or e-mail, of digital libraries or the bricks-and-mortar variety, of paper or digital technologies. Nor need it be a question of speed and efficiency versus a slower pace of life. These modes of operation are only in conflict when we insist that one or the other is the only way to operate."

Some readers may find certain sections of the book overly detailed (e.g., an exhaustive examination of the

changes to a poem by Walt Whitman both during his life and after his death to support the author's assertion that documents are both fixed and fluid). Other readers may find that the author's dry prose sometimes detracts from the interesting information provided. Notwithstanding those concerns, this book will appeal to readers interested in placing documents in their historical and societal contexts while also attempting to make sense of documents in the digital age.

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