

# Novice to Know-How Module Text

## Course 1: Introduction to Digital Preservation

# Module 1: Why is Digital Preservation Important

The development of this course was funded by The National Archives (UK) as part of the "Plugged In, Powered Up" digital capacity building strategy.

## 1. Digital Information is Everywhere.

Digital information plays a central role in all of our lives:

- In the ways we communicate both at work and socially
- In how we shop, manage our money, access health care, and educate ourselves
- And it is fundamental to facilitating research, commerce, and the work of our governments

Therefore, being able to access, use, and reuse digital information is essential. And for some companies, like Google and Facebook, information is the main commodity in which they trade.

But maintaining the ability to access and use digital information presents very different challenges compared to more traditional analogue resources.

## 2. Analogue Content.

If you have a handwritten document, a printed book, or a drawing on paper, you will have reasonable confidence that you will be able to store it and reuse it at a later date. Analogue items are generally quite robust and will even hold up well to the benign neglect of being put in a cupboard and forgotten about. As long as you don't get a nasty mould outbreak, you will most likely be able to go back years later and, as long as you speak the language a document is written in, you'll be able read and use it.

## 3. Digital Challenges.

But the challenges faced when preserving digital information generally require more urgent and proactive steps to be taken.

Let's use as an example, a text document saved on a rewritable CD. To be able to access and use this document we must first have a computer with a CD-drive, and on that computer, we

need to have a compatible piece of software that will allow you to open the document and render it onscreen correctly. But computer hardware is constantly in a cycle of becoming obsolete and being upgraded and replaced. In relation to this example, does your own laptop even have a CD drive anymore? And new versions of software are released regularly. Can we rely on it being compatible with old files?

And this is before we even consider the longevity of the storage media itself, the rewritable CD. They are surprisingly fragile and susceptible to data loss as the dye used to record the information can degrade quickly. We might only be able to rely on it for a few years at most.

## 4. What's the problem?

So, to summarise:

- We know that digital information has value, it creates opportunities, and is essential to many aspects of our personal and working lives...
- But access to digital information requires the correct infrastructure of hardware, software, and people with the skills to maintain and use it...
- However, that technology and those people change, which will create barriers to use....
- So, if we want to continue to benefit from the opportunities digital information can create, we need to take active steps to protect and preserve it.

## 5. Digital Preservation can help!

This is where digital preservation enters, allowing individuals and organizations to take the steps needed to protect access to their important digital information. In the next module we'll start to describe what digital preservation is, and what's involved. But before embarking on that path, it's useful to think about what will motivate your organisation to do digital preservation. What issues are important? What opportunities and benefits do you hope to accrue? What pitfalls do you hope to avoid? Your motivation may include things like:

- Legal and regulatory compliance
- Increasing efficiency
- Opening up new revenue streams
- Improving health
- Protecting the environment
- Enabling research
- Documenting cultural heritage, or
- Ensuring transparency and accountability

## 6. Wrap-Up.

Being clear on your motivations from the beginning will help shape the decisions you make in relation to digital preservation. So, take a few minutes now to note down some key motivators for your organization before moving on to the next module.