

Manage Data Before Data Manages You

An article in three parts about key aspects of data storage, retrieval, protection and management practices for small businesses.



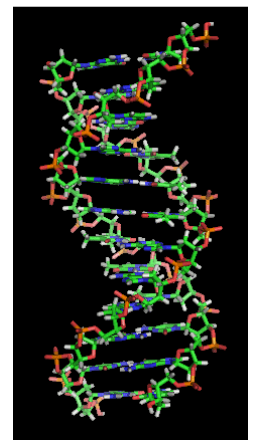
1. From DNA to USB

The benefits of different systems of recording and storing records.

If you know your RAM from your ZIP then you'll know we're talking different types of data storage. Here's a question for you: "What's the oldest data storage device in existence?" (Clue: we all have it and it's inside us).

Still stumped? It's our DNA – Deoxyribonucleic Acid¹.

This substance is the data storage device for our species (and indeed all living life on the planet). There it is, deep inside all of us: a *hard drive for humans*. Although it's a long way off before humans turn completely into computers, our lives are becoming increasingly technology-dependent. Storing, retrieving and protecting data has become an everyday reality for many of us (and for organisations we come into contact with).



DNA: the blueprint of life

Let's think for a moment about the many ways that we hold on to data. We can record and carry electronically stored data around with us (USBs, laptop hard disks, digital camera storage devices, mobile cameras, 'hard copies'); store it on the internet (file share sites, social networking sites); store it externally (on a hard drive, CD or DVD); store it on the computer or laptop (hard disk) or store it through printoffs and records.

And there are many storage media we can use for our data: Mobile phones, iPads, iPods, Playstations, Computers, Laptops, Digital cameras, Memory Sticks, paper, pictures, forms, folders etc.



There are a myriad ways to store and retrieve data. An efficient storage system will match the data to the most appropriate storage media

If we maintain websites, social network webpages, send and receive emails, upload pics to fileshare sites, buy or sell online we are storing data about ourselves, our business and our networks on the web. In fact, anything we type in and send is stored on the internet for a year in the UK².

Did you know that every time we surf the net, we let other people know that we have been there and what we searched for last time. 'Cookies' are pieces of text that help those sites you visited know things about the way you use their services online.

¹ *Gilbert, Walter (Feb 1986). "The RNA World". Nature 319: 618.*

² *www.telegraph.co.uk, David Barrett, 9.30am 5th April 2009*

In a world awash with data, it's important to choose the right storage method for the types of data you need to keep. Think about how often you need to access certain data, how long you need to hang on to data that is no longer relevant to you ('archiving') and design the most appropriate storage method for your organisation.

2. The 'Ins and Outs' of Data

The importance of having effective systems for inputting and retrieving information.

Data forms the building blocks for an effective business. It helps you to learn about your business, staff and competitors. Good data leads to high quality information that allows you to make informed decisions and demonstrate effectiveness.

When it comes to business, it's important that you can keep track of all the media you use to store data and keep on top of the type of data that you are storing there. Data that you don't know about is data that is squatting in your storage area.

Whilst all of us have access to data, the successful business person will organise data shrewdly and efficiently. Data is either useful or it's not. Discern between these two types and you are off to a good start. Systematise data, make it easy to collate, organise and analyse. Use the most appropriate storage media for the way you like to work and keep the data secure at all times.

Organise your data well. Make sure the way you design your data management system means that it's accurate, accessible, flexible and responsive to your needs (both now and the future). Also, dispose of old data efficiently and regularly.

And finally, good data is like gold dust, especially for competitors. Don't be slapdash in protecting and securing your data – it's a good investment and an essential ongoing activity in the modern workplace. Ensure your firewalls, antivirus and malware software is up-to-date. Don't leave important data on portable media (laptops and USB flash drives) that can be stolen or left absentmindedly in taxis.



Data storage is smaller and more portable than ever

3. The Rights and Wrongs of Data Storage

An overview of legal requirements relating to the recording, storing and accessibility of HR data.

Data you hold about other people is precious. **The Data Protection Act 1998** gives you guidance on what is fair, relevant and appropriate to hold about others and their rights in obtaining that data from you. If your business holds personal data about employees, there is clear guidance on how it can be stored and accessed.

Also, you have the right to find out what is known about you and your business. The Data Protection Act also allows you to find out information that other organisations and public bodies hold about you. If it's not correct or up-to-date, let the **Information Commissioner's Office** (ICO) know.

Design a data storage and retrieval system that matches the way you work and the way you see your business evolving. Keep it simple, keep it agile and most importantly, keep it safe.

So, while the world is awash with data it's not choc-a-bloc with successful business people. In today's information-heavy culture, the sheer amount of data has the potential to distract and dazzle, to divert and discombobulate.

The difference between success and failure in business will come down to the way you organise your data. Make sure you are savvy enough to develop the skills and systems to tame the *data-beast* or, undoubtedly, it will be in control of you.



Are we in control of the data or is the data controlling us?

(pictures courtesy of Wikipedia)

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For more information:

www.ico.gov.uk

www.businesslink.gov.uk

Key points:

Data forms the building blocks for an effective business.

Good data leads to high quality information.

Good data is like gold dust, especially for competitors.

Data is either useful or it's not.

Data that you don't know about is data that is squatting in your storage area.

Data you hold about other people is precious.

Design a data storage and retrieval system that matches the way you work.

The difference between success and failure in business will come down to the way you organise your data.