



PLANNING FOR OBSOLESCENCE

'Remember the Osborne computer? The DEC MicroVax? The Vydec dedicated word processor with the 8-inch disk? Lee Tydlaska does. In fact, he not only remembers obsolete technologies, he collects them.' *

Lee Tydlaska of El Cajon, San Diego, started collecting obsolete technologies 32 years ago as a hobby. 'I was hooked on the constant state of flux, even back in the dark ages of computers', he says. 'Each technology was a good idea to start, but died a sudden death.'

Lee's hobby collection has evolved not only into a 'technology museum', but also a profitable business. He is able to resurrect all sorts of information from long forgotten formats and operating systems for paying customers, ranging from private investigators to large corporations and even the FBI.

Does the Government of New South Wales need a Lee Tydlaska of its own in order to access records created in the past, using now obsolete technologies? Will archives users of the future need to visit technology museums like Lee's in order to access records of the late 20th and early 21st centuries?

Certainly technological change has been just as prevalent here as in the United States. Formats and operating systems have evolved rapidly, often leaving important information inaccessible. Curator of Information and Communications Technology at the Powerhouse Museum, Matthew Connell notes: 'Each year we are approached by people with old disks and tapes who are seeking to extract information. While we have an extensive collection of old IT equipment, it is often unlikely to work, and despite being a large and varied collection, there are vastly more formats and machines out there than we can hold.'

Retaining the technology used to create records can therefore form only part of the solution to this issue. Current recordkeeping best practice recommends a planned approach that combines a range of strategies, including the use of non-proprietary, widely accepted standard formats for records and regular migration of records as the technology changes.

State Records has been developing a framework of management rules and tools for electronic records over several years. The latest component in this framework is a set of online guidelines called 'Future Proof: Ensuring the Accessibility of Equipment/Technology Dependent Records'.

These guidelines suggest a range of strategies in line with current best practice that, if used by government organisations, can combat the threat of technological obsolescence and help to protect our digital heritage. That way, government organisations will be able to continue to access their electronic and other technology dependent records, and Lee Tydlaska's services will not be required in the future by the citizens of New South Wales.

Cassie Findlay

Cassie Findlay is a Project Officer with State Records, where she advises staff of the NSW public sector on recordkeeping issues.

↑ Source code for the Pong game, 1978

↖ Magnetic tape drive unit, IBM 1400 Series mainframe computer, early 60s

* Steve Mollman, 'Digging for computer dirt', April 22 2002
www.salon.com/tech/feature/2002/04/22/computer_forensics/index.html

'Future Proof':
www.records.nsw.gov.au/publicsector/recordkeeping/guidelines/techdependent/techdependent.entry