The World without Metadata

Imagine walking into your local grocery store and finding that all of the traditional product information is missing. The aisle signage has been removed. The only things you can see are the blank containers designed for the products themselves. Let’s suppose you need soup to go with Saturday’s dinner. You grab a can and begin to shake it in hopes that the weight and movement can provide you with some indication of the contents. Is it tomato soup or a can of beans? Perhaps it is a can of peaches or mixed vegetables. Or, maybe you’re an experienced shopper who can distinguish between soup and other products. Is it chicken noodle soup, vegetable soup or clam chowder?

Frustrated, you head over to the dry goods area but your problems don’t seem to fade away. This time you pick up a blank box, which may contain laundry detergent, dishwashing cleaner or cereal. Of course, these uncertainties have little impact compared to those at the pharmacy, where you may be taking Viagra or Tylenol for your now splitting headache. Can you imagine any business that would actually run their store in such a manner? Can you imagine any retail environment without the information or information architecture required to do business? All that missing information is what is known as Metadata.

What is Metadata

According to Wikipedia, Metadata provides context for information and data. It is used to facilitate the understanding, usage and management of information and data, both human and computers. Therefore, metadata can describe data conceptually so that others can understand them and it can describe the data syntactically so others can use them. The two types of description together can facilitate decisions about how to manage the data. Often, data providers will provide users access to a variety of metadata fields, which can be used individually or in combinations, and applied by different users to achieve different goals.

Open the box, and there is an insert with even more metadata on how and when to use the product. Not to mention the bottle itself: It repeats much of the metadata that was on the box, only in smaller print. We take this type of metadata for granted, and often demand more, such as origin, sustainability and other consumer strengthening metadata points.

Metadata Matters

We never think about Metadata, but we rely on it heavily. What would life be like without metadata? Imagine the kind of metadata that appears on every product inside of every store. For example, consider a simple bottle of aspirin, where the metadata on the box includes the manufacturer, ingredients, volume, quantity, directions and safety warnings. Open the box, and there is an insert with even more metadata on how and when to use the product. Not to mention the bottle itself: It repeats much of the metadata that was on the box, only in smaller print. We take this type of metadata for granted, and often demand more, such as origin, sustainability and other consumer strengthening metadata points.

Reading suggestions

Universal Meta Data Models by David Marco and Michael Jennings, 2004

Metadata 100 Success Secrets 100 Most asked questions on Meta Data How-To Management, Repositories, Software, Standards, Tools and Databases by George Nelson
The Business Context for Metadata

A recent study by ISG reveals that:
• Bank staff add the equivalent of 4,250 pages of content into our systems (Email, Network Drives, IRIS, ImageBank) every minute;
• It would take one person speed reading (30 seconds per page) (2038 years) to read our content in these systems.
• 45% of staff have been at the Bank for less than 5 years, they are struggling to find what they need in this sea of information.
• We are drowning in information, which is not fully usable because it is not well described, understood or contextualized.
• We do not know how many of our best practices are new inventions and how many are re-inventions.

We are fostering a staff that is not able to reuse information and knowledge, but one that is re-inventing and engaged in vanity publishing to get recognition. Do we know how many ESW’s and TA’s are intellectual duplications, do we know what enables the re-invention that undoubtedly exists?

Bank Metadata should:

• Make new staff productive faster;
• Allow staff to find relevant information faster;
• Refocus staff on reusing, rather than re-inventing;
• Integrate external knowledge better and more often;
• Nurture a culture of Business Intelligence (BI) on demand;
• Improve time and quality of Bank projects to markets;

Democratizing Metadata

One of the first questions asked when the topic comes to metadata surrounds responsibility and accountability.

Who should be responsible for metadata and why; a valid set of questions, however the first statement should be the assertion that metadata is indeed important and followed by an acknowledgement that the reliance on metadata is ever increasing.

It’s quality and context are the basis for a functioning World Bank Group and it helps us to improve our competitive position by advancing our ability to be agile and proactive. Any sustainable democratic process relies on a legislative strength surrounding it and so should the WBG’s metadata practice.

We have functioning pockets of strength in this field, but they are disconnected and stove-piped. It would be short sighted and counterproductive to centralize existing metadata practices. Instead the practice should be federalized and a strengthened governance process should be established followed.

Bank staff create so much information and we need to rely on better creation and capture of metadata associated with this information. We live in a world where information creation and publication has become highly democratized, now we need to professionalize these phenomena to include the creation and capture of metadata simultaneously.

This requires awareness, training, direction and purpose to ensure a return of the Bank investment.

Therefore, it would be advisable to introduce a more purposeful Information Management function in the Bank with a mandate to foster a federalized data function that could be the legislative backbone to metadata capture, evolution and measurement. This function would become the innovational incubator for new capabilities such as business intelligence around emerging development issues and could foster enhanced productivity and knowledge re-use.

Wikipedia...

Metadata (meta data, or sometimes meta information) is “data about data”, of any sort in any media. Metadata is text, voice, or image that describes what the audience wants or needs to see or experience. The audience could be a person, group, or software program. Metadata is important because it aids in clarifying and finding the actual data. In data processing, metadata provides information about, or documentation of, other data managed within an application or environment.

For example, metadata would document data about data elements or attributes, (name, size, data type, etc) and data about records or data structures (length, fields, columns, etc) and data about data (where it is located, how it is associated, ownership, etc.). Metadata may include descriptive information about the context, quality and condition, or characteristics of the data. It may be recorded with high or low granularity.