



The

Business Report & Journal

Covering Savannah, Hilton Head, the Low Country and Coastal Georgia.



• EDITORIAL & COMMENTARY

Monday September 03, 2007

Business Information Zone What is Your Backup Plan?

Biography: Kevin Lee Elder is an associate professor of information systems at Georgia Southern University. He may be reached by e-mail at kelder@georgiasouthern.edu.



Kevin Lee Elder

At some point during the fourth century all knowledge of ancient Egyptian scripts was lost. There was no method available to decipher the language of hieroglyphics which had been richly preserved on ancient Egyptian monuments, stone tablets, and sheets of papyrus. Fortunately, while on an expedition to Egypt in 1799 at Rosetta, a harbor on the Mediterranean coast in Egypt, Napoleon's army discovered an artifact which has become known as the Rosetta Stone. This stone contained the inscription of a decree issued in 196 BC by Ptolemy V Epiphanes. The decree described the repealing of various taxes, something our US Congress could learn from, but that is something for another column in another venue. The decree was repeated three times in two languages, Greek and Egyptian, with the Egyptian version appearing twice, once in hieroglyphics and once in demotic, a cursive form of the hieroglyphic script. Since there is an abundance of information on ancient Greek dialects the stone's Greek version of the decree contained the key to decipher the meaning of the ancient Egyptian texts. Without the discovery of the Rosetta Stone we would not be able to interpret many ancient texts and inscriptions of Egyptian hieroglyphic and demotic scripts found on sheets of papyrus and monuments throughout Egypt. The Rosetta Stone was an important backup process for the Egyptians.

In today's digital world we are faced with a similar problem to what the Egyptians faced. We have many forms of hieroglyphics in our businesses and homes. Invoices, inventories, family photos, and other important documents risk the same fate as the Egyptian texts. Due to the rapid evolution of technology, future digital systems may not be able to read and/or interpret the digital recordings made by older systems. How many of you have your "hieroglyphics" from fifteen or twenty years ago stored on five and a quarter inch floppy disks like I do? How many of you have a personal computer with a five and a quarter inch disk in working order to access that information? I thought so.

We have quickly moved through technology in the past 50 years or so, and we have left a vast amount of hieroglyphics in varying formats. If we don't create a plan for our own Digital Rosetta Stone we risk losing our history. Most businesses and quite a few individuals have backup plans. We all need them. We need to backup our important data onto something and put it away for safe keeping. For many years the primary method was magnetic tapes. We backed up our hieroglyphics onto the tapes, put them in metal boxes and stored them in a safe location, in case we needed them in the future. In the meantime we upgrade the system and our backups move to a new format. If we don't get our backups from storage and translate them from one hieroglyphic's format to another the old technology will go away and we risk having information at our fingertips that we cannot read just like the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics we're for roughly 1400 years!

We have another problem the Egyptians did not face. The Egyptians hieroglyphics were at least etched into place using a technique that has allowed us to access it for thousands of years, giving us enough time to figure out how to translate them. How long will magnetic tapes last? I'll give you one guess on whether it will be more or less than one thousand years. It is far less. Today most of us are using CD or DVD technology to store our backups. How long have you heard those will last? 50 years, 100 years, or more? Whatever you heard, it is a good bet it will last less than that for you. CDs and DVDs that are professionally created, stored in air tight containers, away from the heat, cold, dust, sun light, etc. will last longer than the CDs and DVDs we create on our computers as backups and expose to all those harmful conditions. I recently went to play a CD recording, professionally created twenty years ago, and found it to be blank. It was a rare recording of an early Christian Contemporary Rock group. They are soon to become the latter day Egyptian hieroglyphics if we are not careful.

So what is your plan for backups? What media have you backed up to? How often do you check and make sure you can still read from your backups? When you purchase new technology do you upgrade all your old backups so they can be read on the new technology? Do you store your backups in a location where they will be safe for thousands of years? Or will you risk the same fate as the hieroglyphics? Will you walk like the Egyptians?