

(I CAN'T GET NO) SATISFACTION

Measuring Success in Digital Stewardship Programs

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Abstract – Approaches to digital stewardship vary from institution to institution. Given the substantial differences among organizational models and program maturity, what indicates successful organization of the long term work of digital preservation to practitioners? Panelists will introduce and contextualize their ongoing research into the shared characteristics of successful digital preservation programs throughout the field. They will identify the emergent themes articulated by research subjects thus far and engage attendees to discuss challenges and opportunities of digital preservation at their respective institutions.

Keywords – maintenance, sustainability, policies, organizational culture

Conference Topics – Designing and Delivering Sustainable Digital Preservation; Building Capacity, Capability and Community

I. BACKGROUND

Recent publications indicate that practitioners are increasingly discontent with how their institutions organize digital preservation responsibilities and duties. The 2017 staffing survey conducted by the National Digital Stewardship Alliance (NDSA)

asked respondents whether or not they agreed with the following statement: “The way our digital preservation function is currently organized (staffing levels, expertise, where they are placed within the larger organization) works well.” Of the 133 people who took the survey, roughly 46% either disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement[1]. This represents a significant increase from the 34% who responded similarly to the same question in the report’s 2012 iteration[2]. The increasing discontent with the status quo suggests that there is ample room for improvement, but stops short of indicating where or how changes should be made. Additionally, Oya Rieger’s *The State of Digital Preservation in 2018: A Snapshot of Challenges and Gaps* articulates some areas in need of improvement as reported by senior management and “thought leaders” in the field, among them: ambiguity of responsibilities, misalignment of expectations, and the need to attend to inclusivity, diversity, and social justice[3]. The opportunity remains to engage a diverse spectrum of digital preservation practitioners to solicit perspectives on what works well, what does not, and what organizational improvements might address existing shortcomings and concerns. In this panel, members of the project team will discuss their research and engage audience members in a discussion that addresses key themes that have emerged thus far.

II. STUDY

Panelists are researching how these gaps impact the experience of practitioners throughout the field by conducting and analyzing a series of in-depth interviews with digital preservation professionals who represent diverse backgrounds, organization types, career stages, and managerial responsibilities. Participants in the study were asked to reflect on and evaluate how digital preservation is organized at their institutions. The research seeks to identify the metrics and to analyze the organizational and cultural factors upon which digital preservation practitioners base their judgments of program design. The goal of this study is to identify specific areas and benchmarks for improvement in digital preservation program design.

III. PANEL

A. Panel Structure

The first 10 minutes will provide an overview of the research project and its methodology. Following this brief introduction, audience members will be asked to respond to several anonymous multiple choice polls (administered either digitally via Twitter or manually via notecards) that will be designed to provide a jumping off point for an interactive discussion that centers on the challenges and opportunities of digital preservation at their respective institutions. (E.g.: "If you could make one change at your organization to improve digital stewardship where would you focus? A) Leadership, B) Staffing, C) Policy, D) Funding). The poll will serve as an ice-breaker to get the audience members thinking about this subject concretely. The moderator will make observations about the results and ask both panelists and audience members alike a series of questions designed to spark discussion and debate around the research project's major themes.

This will have two benefits: it will allow the panelists to discuss their individual and tentative conclusions, conjectures, and reflections based on their existing research. It will also enable attendees to share their insight and interpretations, which will, in turn, increase the diversity of perspectives considered in shaping the project's conclusions and outcomes. As this research is ongoing, questions are incompletely resolved. There is ambiguity among

panelists' interpretation of the sometimes contradictory responses to structured interview questions on how to best address the growing dissatisfaction, both expressed in the project's literature review and in the ongoing research. Audience input will enrich the panelists' understanding of their existing data and emergent themes.

B. Emergent Themes

Themes that have already emerged in this research and which will guide the majority of the discussion include: the role of leadership in articulating and supporting a strategic vision and/or mission statements; the effects of different internal decision-making paradigms; communication and digital preservation comprehension needs among coworkers, managers, donors, and peers; immediate priorities for programmatic change; and other factors that contribute to low morale and burnout among practitioners.

C. Impact

This guided discussion will encourage discussion and debate about how digital preservation can be done well and how it can be done poorly, regardless of an institution's size or capacity. The themes discussed in this panel will reveal key signifiers of success or failure in digital preservation programs that transcend variations in institutional type or funding model. They will inform efforts to improve the overall functionality of digital preservation programs and will have practical implications for practitioners themselves, the middle managers who often directly oversee their work, and the senior-level administrators charged with leading their organizations. Ultimately a vision for a successful model of digital preservation practice will emerge -- one that sustains its workforce as well as its mission.

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