Saving microfiche and microfilm records while saving money

Legacy microform records (microfiche, microfilm, or microcards) can be a problem for organizations for several reasons.

You **can't throw them away** if the retention schedule dictates they must be kept. You **can't digitize everything** because the costs of doing so can quickly spiral out of control – often reaching upwards of several million dollars. And you **can't store them in a closet** because they often disintegrate before the retention period expires (and, besides, nobody wants to dust off an antique microfiche reader to locate a document anyway).

Fortunately, there is a way to solve all these problems and effectively deal with legacy microform records.

One drawer of microfiche can hold 10,000 sheets, with each sheet containing 400 images. That's 4,000,000 images per drawer, 16,000,000 images per four-drawer cabinet, or six trucks of paper.

Digitizing all your microform records can be prohibitively expensive

At first thought, digitization seems like the correct solution for handling legacy microform records. But very few people realize what a few cabinets of microform records equate to when compared to, say, a box of papers.

Let's look at an example. About 2,500 sheets of paper can fit into an average banker's box. One truck can hold roughly 1,000 of these boxes, which means there can be up to 2,500,000 sheets of paper or images per truck. That's a lot of data! But microfiche, for example, can hold significantly more.

One drawer of microfiche can hold 10,000 sheets, with each sheet containing 400 images. That's 4,000,000 images per drawer, 16,000,000 images per four-drawer cabinet, or six *trucks* of paper. Digitizing that amount can easily cost several millions of dollars.

More variables are obviously at play. For example: microcards hold less data; microfilms can hold more. But this example roughly illustrates why digitizing "just a cabinet of microform records" is often prohibitively expensive – especially if you're digitizing inactive material that rarely requires retrieval.

The same old "do nothing approach" is no longer an option either

There was a time when doing nothing was a viable, if not exactly ideal, solution. You might have had a few experienced team members who knew how to pull and view microform records when needed, and while the equipment was aging, it worked well enough.

But the pandemic changed the game. In many cases, those skilled employees decided not to come back to the office, or they took early retirement. Perhaps, with fewer employees in the office and seeking to free up valuable real estate, you embarked on a real estate downsizing, leaving less room for microform records and readers.

Even if the pandemic hasn't had an outsized impact on your organization, time still marches on. With each passing year, it's getting harder and harder to find microform reader parts. Do you have a backup plan if the equipment breaks down and you can't get it repaired? Do you have an IT budget that carves out funds for a new microform reader?

Then, there's the age of the records themselves. Often these collections can date back to the 1950s and 1960s. Depending on how they are stored, you might see dry, brittle edges, which makes it impossible to run records through the equipment. Or maybe the images have faded over time and are now so light you can't see them anymore. Even worse, maybe you can smell the strong scent of vinegar, which is one of the sure signs your material is degrading. Depending on the temperature and humidity of the area that they have been stored in, the inventory can degrade fast.

Regardless of the reason why, **not having access to microform material opens up a whole new set of regulatory compliance and legal exposure risks.**

So what's the right way to deal with legacy microform records?

There are several approaches you can take to handle legacy microform records while minimizing the expense.

First, know that digitization costs have decreased significantly over the past few years. Newer equipment is faster, and depending on how many machines you have, you can have multiple operators run the scanning equipment at the same time. In many cases, the time it takes to digitize is half as much today compared to even five years ago. What might have been an unreasonable cost the last time you checked may now be within your budget.

Second, you can only digitize what you need and dispose of what you don't. In some cases, it may make sense to sort and separate the records and only scan the microfiche or microcards that are active and applicable while destroying any that have already met your retention schedule. However, it must be said that microfilm does not sort as easily because of the many images contained on one roll of film.

Third, you could choose to digitize only those records that are already degrading. If you suspect some of your material is already degrading, there are simple tools to test the material. You can target these records for imaging while making sure you store the rest of your records at the right temperatures and humidity. According to the Northeast Document Conservative Center, film-based microforms should be stored in temperatures less than 70 degrees and at a relative humidity of less than 50 percent without fluctuations.

Fourth, you can reconsider your approach to storage and access. If in the past you had been sending cabinets or boxes to store offsite, you probably had those records sent back to you when you needed to access them. Then, when you were done, you sent them back to the storage facility. Today, Image on Demand at the storage site coupled with a climate-controlled storage solution can be a low-cost way to address your microform collection without the cost of digitizing the entire inventory or constantly shipping records back and forth from storage to your office. You simply digitize the records that are needed when they are needed, and the rest can remain in microform.

Remember, you don't have to deal with legacy microform records on your own

Hopefully, this information has given you an idea of some of the problems associated with microform storage as well as some of the ways to handle them. The good news is that you don't have to do it all yourself.

Iron Mountain is uniquely positioned to handle any budget and project relating to microform records. We continually invest in the latest digitizing equipment; our teams work with a lot of microform records and understand the nuances associated with them. We have many options, ranging from complete digitization of records to storage with Image on Demand, and we offer a variety of climate options to provide the exact right environment for your records (all the way down to 35 degrees Fahrenheit).

And because all Iron Mountain equipment is 220 feet below the earth in a climate-controlled environment, Iron Mountain isn't impacted by natural and man-made disasters, such as hurricanes, tornadoes, humidity, fires, earthquakes, terrorist activity, and civil unrest near high-target areas. It turns out that the safest place on Earth is actually in the earth.

You get the best of all worlds. We will store and preserve your microform records (or any format records as well), scan them on demand when they are needed, and destroy them according to your retention policies. You gain all the convenience of digitization – but only for records you need to view and only when you need to view them.

Find out more at www.ironmountain.com/services/vital-records-storage.

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About Iron Mountain

Iron Mountain Incorporated (NYSE: IRM), founded in 1951, is the global leader for storage and information management services. Trusted by more than 220,000 organizations around the world, and with a real estate network of more than 85 million square feet across more than 1,400 facilities in over 50 countries, Iron Mountain stores and protects billions of information assets, including critical business information, highly sensitive data, and cultural and historical artifacts. Providing solutions that include secure storage, information management, digital transformation, secure destruction, as well as data centers, art storage and logistics, and cloud services, Iron Mountain helps organizations to lower cost and risk, comply with regulations, recover from disaster, and enable a more digital way of working. Visit www.ironmountain.com for more information.

RM-SB-060223A