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The Science Of Managing Our Digital Stuff (MIT Press)

Synopsis

Each of us has an ever-growing collection of personal digital data: documents, photographs, PowerPoint presentations, videos, music, emails and texts sent and received. To access any of this, we have to find it. The ease (or difficulty) of finding something depends on how we organize our digital stuff. In this book, personal information management (PIM) experts Ofer Bergman and Steve Whittaker explain why we organize our personal digital data the way we do and how the design of new PIM systems can help us manage our collections more efficiently.Bergman and Whittaker report that many of us use hierarchical folders for our personal digital organizing. Critics of this method point out that information is hidden from sight in folders that are often within other folders so that we have to remember the exact location of information to access it. Because of this, information scientists suggest other methods: search, more flexible than navigating folders; tags, which allow multiple categorizations; and group information management. Yet Bergman and Whittaker have found in their pioneering PIM research that these other methods that work best for public information management don't work as well for personal information management. Bergman and Whittaker describe personal information collection as curation: we preserve and organize this data to ensure our future access to it. Unlike other information management fields, in PIM the same user organizes and retrieves the information. After explaining the cognitive and psychological reasons that so many prefer folders, Bergman and Whittaker propose the user-subjective approach to PIM, which does not replace folder hierarchies but exploits these unique characteristics of PIM.

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Customer Reviews

Our digital stuff is increasing by the bucket load each day. How do we manage it? Bergman and Whittaker's important and scientifically grounded book provides a fascinating account of why we persist with seemingly old-fashioned methods when there are alternative seemingly better approaches that have been designed by software companies. Much food for thought. (Yvonne Rogers, Professor of Interaction Design, University College London)In 1980, personal digital information meant a few dozen files. Today, it is many thousands of files per person. We each curate our own British Museum of digital stuff. Bergman and Whittaker explain how and why we do this, accessibly and authoritatively integrating the psychology and technology of personal information management, and directing that understanding toward future designs. (John M. Carroll, Distinguished Professor of Information Sciences and Technology, Pennsylvania State University; author of Making Use)As two of the most experienced researchers in the world on personal information management, Bergman and Whittaker have written the go-to book. Drawing on insights from years of research, they point the way to developing much better technologies for dealing with the thorny challenges of keeping, organizing, and using our own digital stuff. (Abigail Sellen, Principal Researcher, Microsoft Research; coauthor of The Myth of the Paperless Office)Why aren't the information retrieval tools that have partly tamed content on the web equally effective in helping us manage the massive amounts of digital stuff we all have accumulated? Drawing from their own empirical research and fundamental principles of cognitive psychology, Bergman and Whittaker identify the way that our prior knowledge of the content and predictions about context of future use cause hierarchical folders to be both the preferred and most effective methods for managing our digital content. The deep, scientific base for their explanation and applications to new designs for personal information management makes this book stand out. (Robert Kraut, Herbert A. Simon Professor of Human-Computer Interaction, Carnegie Mellon University)Fascinating. (Tim Harford Financial Times)

Ofer Bergman is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Information Science at Bar-Ilan University. Steve Whitaker is Professor of Human-Computer Interaction at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

I wish I had this as a resource when I embarked upon my PhD in the field of Personal Information

Management (PIM). Steve and Ofer are well known luminaries in the field. The book makes the point that folder hierarchies, although often looked down upon in PIM research circles, actually offer key advantages for personal information management. The authors highlight that the "trendier" alternatives of search and tagging work well in group systems, but less so for personal use.The book is rich with information but not overwhelming. Furthermore, unlike many technical books, it comes with some beautiful cartoon illustrations. The authors have succeeded in creating an enjoyable reading experience. It belongs on the bookshelf for academics and practicians alike, as well as laypeople with an interest in the now universal task of curating our own digital information spaces. Highly recommended.

This is an important book. The research world usually works in nice increments, testing previous work and either strengthening or weakening the results. Not many times do you get to see work that take a completely different look at existing models. The work by Bergman and Whittaker is an example of such work. As a researcher and practitioner in the areas of human computer interaction I am especially happy to see this book since it forces us to relook at how we think about and design interfaces, interaction models and even information architectures for our products. Anyone who designs, manages and builds user facing information systems must read this book. You might disagree with some of their conclusions, but at least you will act on as someone who has considered that personal information systems are not the same as public information systems and need different interactions models and interfaces to serve their user's needs. Lastly, the book is very well written and is a fun and easy read- you do not need to be a researcher in the field to enjoy and learn from it.

A meritorious book I'm sure, but I think it is fair to warn you that it will not give practical suggestions for managing your digital stuff. The authors outline some principles or approaches for designing better tools for Personal Information Management, but they don't give tips for using existing tools. I bought the book to improve my PIM; you should not make the same mistake.

Well. that's a great read.A very interesting, intelligent and reachable book.

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