



Gorffennol Digidol Digital Past - 2020

TO ETERNITY FROM HERE?

Building digital capacity in the archives sector

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Archives are struggling to accession, preserve and offer access to the increasing volume of digital records they receive today. Many hold records on vulnerable media that they lack capacity to transfer and few have developed reliable pipelines for transferring digital information from their parent organisations. Our 2019 survey conducted with Jisc found not only a shortage of skills but also a lack of commitment from senior managers to digital work – on this latter measure the sector is moving backwards. Archives must accept digital work as a core part of archival practice and archive professionals must continue to develop their skills to ensure they can continue their most critical functions in a digital age. To do otherwise puts the record at risk and consequently there is no more urgent challenge facing the archives sector today.

Some digital skills are technical (generating a checksum, accessing data from an API) but many of the most critical are not: deciding between rival software vendors, writing a digital strategy, forming constructive relationships with IT colleagues. Archives must support their staff to (corporately) develop a full spectrum of digital skills. The National Archives (TNA) is supporting this process through the development of online guidance ('Novice to Ninja'), taught sessions ('Archives School'), a peer mentoring programme, a digital leadership programme and the launch of the DALE (Digital Archives Learning Exchange) network – amongst other programmes. The sector can itself pool expertise and form new collaborations with academics and the civic tech sector.

Taking control of the systems and business processes that today's archival practice needs is not easy but it is the only way to safeguard records for the future. The sector must articulate its needs as never before and demonstrate afresh that it is as trustworthy a custodian of the digital record as it has been for parchment and paper for so many years.

Biography

Jo Pugh joined TNA in 2007, working in online education before leaving in 2012 to complete a doctorate in large-scale, complex IT systems (LSCITS). He returned to TNA in 2017 as Digital Development Manager, where he is responsible for systems such as Manage Your Collections and ARCHON as well as digital capacity building in the archives sector. He continues to research new ways to present and contextualise archival holdings and has collaborated with Wikimedia UK, Columbia University's History Lab and the University of New South Wales.