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THE EVOLUTION OF TECHNOLOGY

a look back at the last 20 years

Anne Edmondson, Director of Marketing

O'Neil Software, Inc.

As O'Neil celebrates 20 years of providing record storage solutions, PRISM has asked us to take step back and review the technical evolution of the record storage industry.

In the beginning, record storage was a sleepy business. Those who have been in the industry will attest to the fact that in its infancy the record center, referred to then as a warehouse, faced the challenge of educating the customer on why they should outsource their information. Back in those days, managing information meant nothing more than getting the right box to the customer. If you could complete accurate deliveries in a timely manner you filled the need of the customer. If you could provide the customer a report of their inventory you were high tech.

That was then; a time when PRISM was called ACRC, the Association of Commercial Record Centers. Today everyone has gone high tech. A business once made up of pallets, forklifts and warehouses has become one of laser scanners, portable printers and Internet access. Record Centers don't dare call themselves warehouses. They no longer store boxes;

today they are in the business of managing information.

The first use of technology in the record center was the barcode. O'Neil is proud to have pioneered the use of barcoding in the record storage industry. At a moving conference, Wells Bekins mentioned to Tim O'Neil, President of O'Neil Software, that barcode tracking might fit well in box storage. With that the 'light bulb' went off and the development of a software package that

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tracked boxes and files with barcodes began.

What barcodes provided the record center was an alternate method of storage, referred to in many ways, but most commonly as Random Access Filing. This refers to the ability for a container to be returned to another location within a facility, thus maxi-

mizing space. The record center no longer had to maintain holes for boxes that were at the customer's sight. In theory it provided 110% space optimization.

Most importantly, the barcode provided the record center with a method to accurately track inventory in an automated manner. They no longer needed to depend on hand tracking, filing systems and fixed locations. They now gained two key efficiencies: speed and accuracy.

As the use of barcodes became an industry standard, so did the use of portable scanners. In the beginning the standard scanner was a 'dumb terminal.' This device had the ability to collect information and then transmit the information to update the computer system. Although in limited use today, this type of data collection device is quite fragile and is seen as antiquated technology.

Today's software providers use various types of laser scanners. These devices have the ability to provide two-way communication. They can not only collect data, but also tell the user what data needs to be collected. For example, they can tell the user what box to pick and notify the user if the wrong box is being picked. They can even tell the user if he has scanned a box that has been missing. The uses of such interactive technology have taken accuracy one-step further. Furthermore, on the most rudimentary level, accuracy of scan, laser scanners such as the PDT3100 will compare the barcode read

at least four times prior to accepting it. This provides for a more accurate barcode interpretation.

Along with portable computing came the portable printer. The portable printer allows the record center to print receipts at the customer's site, and eliminate the

"We sent it to you," and "We didn't pick it up" challenges. The portable receipt documents for both parties what was delivered and picked up at each transaction. It replaces handwritten receipts, which are prone to handwriting discrepancies, and adds the feel of Federal Express type deliveries.



In the mid-90s the record center industry moved from DOS and embraced Windows. Software products emerged that became powerful tools of data manipulation. Information was easily input and retrievable in literally thousands of formats. It was at this time that record centers truly made the transition into Information Management Companies.

With Windows technology, instead of inputting information and completing limited search functions, through the use of more powerful data engines and table technology, searches became endless. A user could ask the system to find a particular box requested on specific day, pulled by a particular person and so on. An end-user such as a law firm could call and ask for all the Pleadings Files for Matter Number 93843 and in an instant the record center could tell the user the location of such files and whether they were in or out. Magnetic media could be tracked and managed with meticulous accuracy. Rotation schedules could be created and automated. Equally important, information could be imported and exported with ease. Clients could receive reports just as easily on disk as they could in hard copy. The technology change of Windows was a revolution for this industry and soon those operating on DOS were a step behind.

About the same time Windows technology was introduced, the demand increased for remote communications or modem access. Modem access provided the customer the ability to dial-in to the record center to complete orders, check on box status, complete data entry and so on. It brought the record center into their offices for the first time and gave the customers a greater feeling of control over their inventory. All they needed was a phone line, a communication package such as pcAnywhere™ and a modem,

and they could dial-into the record center.

Larger record centers embraced remote communications for a very different reason. They used it to connect their warehouses. They could now use one central database with several remote workstations. This gave a new means of centralizing facilities.

This use of remote communications is still a useful technology today.

With the dawn of the millennium, new advancements are occurring at a rapid pace. Software developers have embraced even more powerful database engines such as SQL. With such tools speed, data manipulation and overall capabilities grow exponentially. With these new capabilities came the need for record centers to have more than drivers, record center and customer service personnel, they now must employ highly educated Managers of Information Technology.

Most notably now the buzz is Internet access. Each large software vendor has a version of their own and prospects now include it in their Requests for Proposals. Record Centers want to offer their customers the ability to walk through the doors of their business through the Internet. Unlike remote communication, Internet access relies on a technology the customer knows and understands already. They feel comfortable using the Internet and therefore are more likely to embrace its benefits. Who would've thought even ten years ago you would tell a customer that if they wanted a box they could just surf the web? You would've been impressed if you could tell them to send you a fax.

In conclusion, we could explore the ability derived through e-mail, scanning documents, sending reports as attachments, imaging and so on. If we did, this article would become a short novel. What is quite evident is this sleepy business somewhere in the past 20 years woke up and embraced the technological revolution around us. Business owners who used to talk about pallet jacks, warehouses and racking now debate barcode symbologies, the dependability of palm pilots and Internet Access. Somewhere in all this advancement O'Neil and others have created thriving businesses. At O'Neil we've

not only benefited from the journey but have been lucky to have users who have made it with us. We'll look forward to reporting back in year 2021.

Anne Sommi Edmondson is currently the Director of Marketing for O'Neil Software, Inc. Prior to joining O'Neil Software, Anne was Vice President of Sales and Marketing for Security Archives in Wilmington, Delaware. During Anne's time at Security Archives, she personally brought in over 200,000 cubic feet in one calendar year. She has held the position of Secretary for ARMA's Liberty Bell Chapter, spoken at several PRISM International conferences, contributed articles to *inFocus*, interviewed for *Mover* magazine and is Editor in Chief of O'Neil's educational newsletter, *The Strategic Partner*. She currently oversees all of O'Neil Software's marketing efforts. Please feel free to contact Anne directly with any questions or comments at: 908-317-0050 or by e-mail: oneilnj@msn.com



CORPORATE HEADQUARTERS

O'Neil Software, Inc.
8 Mason
Irvine, CA 92618
949-458-1234 (phone)
949-206-6949 (fax)
www.oneilsoft.com
sales@oneilinc.com (e-mail)

European Office

O'Neil Software, Ltd.
Witan Court, 287 Upper Fourth Street
Milton Keynes, MK9 1EH United Kingdom
+44-1908-241234 (phone)
+44-1908-241241 (fax)
www.oneilsoft.com
sales@oneiluk.com (e-mail)

AustralAsia Office

O'Neil AustralAsia Pty Ltd.
6/303 Coronation Drive
Milton
Queensland, 4064
Australia
+61 7 3368 3838 (phone)
+61 7 3368 3816 (fax)
www.oneilsoft.com
sales@oneilau.com (e-mail)

East Coast Office

O'Neil Software, Inc.
28870 U.S. 19 North
Suite 300
Clearwater, Florida 33761
727-726-6173 (phone)
727-726-6193 (fax)
www.oneilsoft.com
rick.jones@oneileast.com (e-mail)