Personal Information Management (PIM) in Practice: Learning from NAPO Professionals – Executive Summary

by Lori Vande Krol and William Jones

The following is provided as an Executive Summary of the full 33-page research paper for the NAPO PIM Project. Please refer to the research paper for further details.

Background

Clients seek assistance in their efforts to organize their information better. Information is critical to nearly every activity in, and aspect of, a person's life - from work to family and friends to spiritual. It is reasonable to say that nearly anything people want to do in these modern times involves information.

A person's information can come in paper forms such as instruction manuals, newspapers, and bank statements, as well as a variety of digital forms as emails, electronic files, and references to web pages. People are increasingly encouraged to "go paperless" by opting for on-line access to financial and health records. Links to, and passwords for, these online records are themselves additional information to be managed.

How should people organize their information? How should they manage it both for the near term and the long run? Is there a single system including an organizational scheme, strategies, habits, and tools that will work for everyone? Of course not! Just as every person is unique, no two systems we build for our clients are likely to be the same.

Even as we know this to be true, however, we also know that clients often cluster into different groups so that the system we design for a client in a given group may resemble the system we design for another client in this group. Consider a few of the many groupings we might make of clients: high-tech vs. low-tech, traditional office vs. mobile work environment, and working parents of school age children vs. retirees. Even as the needs and solutions between these and other groups are apt to be distinct, clients within a group often share a great deal in common. We may gain collectively by sharing solution systems especially with the thought that the solution system developed for one client might, with modifications of course, serve as a useful starting point when developing the solution system for another client.

Similarly, we may gain by greater sharing of the assessments and procedures (e.g., initial needs assessment, inventory of information, profiling of technical background, etc.) that we follow as we begin our work with a client. Just as for solution systems, assessments and procedures would of course still be modified to circumstance. But by sharing and learning from each other, each of us may have less work to do than if we were to start, completely on our own, from "square one".

Whether we're talking of general assessments and procedures to be used across clients or we are talking of systems and approaches designed for specific clients, there is a common theme: Collectively we know a great deal already. Can we pool and share this knowledge to better help us get a running start in our work with new clients? Further, as we better share systems of PIM and, even more so, as we share assessments and procedures, we can begin to invest greater consistency and branding in NAPO itself?

Over two years, we worked with NAPO consultants that specialize in information management to explore this possibility. We used a Delphi Method of inquiry consisting of **three rounds** of data gathering and discussion where later rounds were informed by results of the preceding rounds. Over the course of this investigation, panelists expressed themselves via on-line surveys, real-time conference calls and an asynchronous, open-ended discussion.

Objectives

By design and in line with the iterative nature of the Delphi process, objectives evolved from round to round. The investigation met the following objectives to varying degrees (see italicized comments):

1. Share and discuss relative merits of various systems of PIM and associated schemes of organization, supporting tools, and strategies (e.g., for storing, maintaining and later finding information). *As the investigation proceeded, we concluded that the discussion was more usefully focused on approaches to PIM rather than specific systems.*
2. Share and discuss underlying techniques and guidelines of PIM.
3. Share, critique, and extend a comprehensive list of the various forms of information that clients might need to manage.
4. Develop and refine assessments and procedures that might be used across clients, with some variation, to take inventory, establish current status, and prioritize efforts moving forward. *This objective was added at the end of Round 2 of the investigation.*
5. Explore a methodology for sharing knowledge among NAPO professionals. In particular, we explore the iterative, round-by-round Delphi Method as a way of integrating several more specific methods including the use of surveys, on-line, asynchronous discussions and real-time conference calls. The intent is that the methodology should facilitate a convergence towards consensus.

Methods and Results

Our explorations proceeded through three rounds, each of which provided either input to succeeding rounds or final products or both:

Round 1. Via survey, we asked: What forms of information (paper documents, emails, digital files…) are people concerned about managing? What are notable methods (techniques, tools) people use? We summarized and analyzed the results to determine areas for open discussion in Round 2.

- **Product:** List of information forms to be refined and expanded to define rows for the final information inventory tables (see Figure 1 below).

Round 2. An open, online discussion in two areas: (A) Approaches for organizing and otherwise managing personal information for the longer-term, for lifetime and even for legacy (i.e., as something to bequeath to family and friends). (B) General techniques and guidelines to consider when organizing and otherwise managing personal information.

- **Products:** (A) List of general techniques and guidelines. (B) Considerations of PIM to be refined and expanded to define columns for the final information inventory tables (Figure 1).

Planning for Personal Information Management: Inventory & Assessment Tool - Work

Name:
Date:

Step 1: Complete the information for each row (information form) based on tools and processes currently used. *(Note: Hover over a column (or row) label to a brief explanation. More details can be found on t*

Step 2: Apply color coding to cells in columns D-H:	Green = Works well and I would recommend to others	Yellow = Not yet sure this works/Needs improvement	Red = No system/tool in place; or system does not work well

Forms of Information	Tools & Apps	Organizational Structure	"Holding Bins"	Backup Plan	Maintenance (e.g., clutter control, retention & archival)	Retrieval Strategies & Tactics
2. Electronic files (other than self-made photos & digital recordings)						
a. General files related to topics above						
b. Downloads (e.g., podcasts, articles, etc.)						
c. Applications and executables						
3. Self-made digital photos & audio/video recordings						
4. Email messages and related attachments						
a. Email #1						

Figure 1: A snippet of the work-related information inventory table illustrating considerations (in columns) and some information forms (as rows).

Round 3. Test and refine tables for use in initial inventory and assessment, with rows representing different forms or kinds of information (e.g., emails, important paper documents, digital files, etc.) and columns representing important considerations (e.g., plan for back-up of information, methods for handling incoming information, ways of organizing information to find it again later as needed, etc.)

- **Products:** (A) Information inventory tables – one for work-related information, a second for non-work-related information (e.g., for family, social, medical, financial, hobbies, spiritual, etc.). (B) Pre-assessment short forms to support a more focused, abbreviated use of tables.

Final products of potential value to NAPO consultants and their clients include the following:

- **Information inventory tables**[1] – one for work-related information, the other for non-work-related information. Tables were structured as follows (see Figure 1):
    - Rows in each table are a comprehensive listing of the forms and subforms of information that people may need to manage. The management of some forms of information e.g., texts or paper scraps, may be more important to some clients than others, while the management of other forms of information e.g., emails or important paper documents, may be important to most clients.
    - Columns in each table provide key considerations that apply across information forms. What would happen if the primary copy of the information were lost? How is it backed up? How is old information archived so that it doesn't get in the way of current information (i.e., as clutter). How is information organized for later retrieval?
    - Cells in each table represent a specific consideration as applied to a specific form of information e.g., the archival process for emails. Cells can be completed to indicate current status and next steps for the various information forms, and cells can also be color-coded to prioritize efforts (i.e., green if the specific consideration for the information form is already well-addressed; yellow if status is less certain; red if the cell represents a known point of concern in need of attention).
    - A resource document is provided with the tables to give more detailed explanation for table rows and columns, as well as to provide suggestions for use of the tables in practice.
- **A set of PIM guidelines** to consider in a personal practice of PIM or when consulting with others in their efforts to improve their systems of PIM. Most guidelines have general application across forms of personal information and across circumstances of PIM.
- **A Pre-Assessment Survey Form** (Appendix E of the research paper) as an example for use with clients.

Next Steps

Aside from general application of the methodology with its Delphi process structure to elicit and integrate NAPO member expertise, the following potential next steps have emerged from this project:

- A NAPO wide survey to validate and further refine both the tables and guidelines.
- A case study elaboration of "noteworthy" systems of PIM. This would expand on Round 1 results and involve more detailed interviews with NAPO professionals who, as volunteer participants, agree to

[1] Use of the tables is free but every mention or inclusion of tables in a published work should come with a full citation to the whitepaper that gives full attribution to the authors. Authors request that table users "keep in touch" concerning experiences in the use of the tables and suggestions for improvement. The authors also request notification of additions to a table – whether of more columns for additional considerations of information management or more rows for additional forms of information. In this way tables can be improved over time.

describe one or more systems (e.g., as used by them and their clients) in depth. Consultants, and possibly clients too, might gain useful information, possibly even inspiration ("maybe I could do something similar!") from a review of these systems especially as organized by client groupings (as in "this system has worked well for parents of small children who work part time from a home office").

- An elaboration on possible groupings of NAPO clients by circumstances and need. Possible groupings will be informed by the in-depth descriptions of noteworthy systems of PIM.
- Creation of a rated pre-assessment form, asking clients to rank questions related to their current PIM situation and then providing a "score" based on their responses. The results would provide the consultant with knowledge regarding the client's current challenges and provide a "gaming" activity for the client.
- Use of project results to develop an "Information IQ" test that might provide clients, and their consultants, with useful feedback concerning their overall knowledge of PIM "dos" and "don'ts". The test might also serve as a loss leader on the NAPO web site to draw in potential NAPO clients.

