

## Book Review: Are Records Miscellaneous?

**Jesse Wilkins, CDIA+**

**T**he solution to the overabundance of information is adding more information. Counterintuitive? Yes, but David Weinberger makes a compelling case for exactly this approach – and it has major ramifications for how we manage electronic records moving forward.

*Everything Is Miscellaneous: The Power of the New Digital Disorder* is a good example of a particular genre of business book: very forward-looking, with a broad theme from just beyond the horizon and a liberal sprinkling of “marketingspeak.” While it is most likely aimed at business managers and executives, it is also extraordinarily relevant to records and information management professionals – although some of them might find it a bit uncomfortable to read.

Weinberger starts by introducing current approaches to categorization. He uses an office supply store as an example of the first order of classification – physical location – and signage and catalogs as an example of the second order – indexing of physical objects. He then asks the question that underlies the entire book: “Suppose that now...we are able to arrange our concepts without the silent limitations of the physical. How might our ideas, organizations, and knowledge itself change?” It’s an effective start to a powerful book.

The focus of the book is on digital information categorization and classification. The fundamental thesis is that we have always organized things based on the limitations imposed by physical storage (first order) and retrieval (second order) requirements – but that information is not subject to those limits. This, Weinberger argues, will bring about enormous changes in the way we classify and manage information, and some of those changes are already underway.

*Everything* is broken into chapters and at 233 pages plus end notes, it is a fairly easy read. He uses numerous examples to illustrate his points, ranging from iTunes to Wikipedia and from Amazon to del.icio.us, but each of the examples is presented with enough background and context to allow less Web 2.0-savvy users to readily grasp them.

Weinberger argues for four new strategic principles for managing digital information:

1. *Filter on the way out, not on the way in.* Instead of using gatekeepers to reduce the amount of information stored, save it all and rely on tools to filter out the irrelevant.
2. *Put each leaf on as many branches as possible.* Instead of classifying a picture according to a rigorous hierar-

**TITLE:** *Everything Is Miscellaneous: The Power of the New Digital Disorder*

**AUTHOR:** David Weinberger

**PUBLISHER:** New York Times Books

**PUBLICATION DATE:** May, 2007

**LENGTH:** 278 pages

**PRICE:** \$25

**SOURCE:** Available in most traditional online bookstores.

chical taxonomy, classify it with as many tags as possible.

3. *Everything is metadata and everything can be a label.* Full-text indexing + intrinsic metadata + tags = ready findability today and repurposing tomorrow.
4. *Give up control.* Provide a prebuilt categorization, but recognize that there are as many ways to search for information as there are users.

These are fairly radical departures from the way we have traditionally managed information in general and records in particular. And it may sound as though Weinberger eschews the need for traditional information management professionals. This is not the case; indeed, the book is dedicated “to the librarians.” But he argues that the role of these professionals needs to change from the traditional “a place for everything and everything in its place” model

to one that recognizes the value of having things in more than one place.

The book itself is somewhat miscellaneous; that is, while Weinberger makes a number of compelling arguments in support of his thesis, he wanders all over the map throughout the book. For example, Wikipedia is discussed at length in several chapters. And while he doesn't coin too many terms (see the review of *Wikinomics*, September/ October 2007 *IMJ*, for one example of this), his use of "miscellaneous" is not really the traditional usage of the term – something he admitted in a recent interview in *KMWorld*. This could turn off a number of potential readers.

Weinberger is a prolific thinker and writer; his previous works include *The Cluetrain Manifesto: the End of Business*

*as Usual* (co-author) and *Small Pieces Loosely Joined: a Unified Theory of the Web*. He also writes regularly for *KMWorld* and publishes (irregularly) his own newsletter, *Journal of the Hyperlinked Organization*. And as he did with those works, *Everything* has its own website at [www.everythingismiscellaneous.com](http://www.everythingismiscellaneous.com).

This reviewer has already read *Everything* four times and marked it up heavily; Weinberger, in fact, envisions a future where electronic books are marked up in similar fashion and that those markups are made available to

anyone who wants to search on, say, what management consultants, executives, or Ph.D.s have marked up. The examples are insightful and relevant; the value of this book is in the fresh approach it provides to one of the most fundamental tenets of records management.

*Everything* was simply one of the most important books of 2007. Records managers who want to understand how to manage the burgeoning volume of digital information in their organizations would do well to read it. ■

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