

DIGITAL PRESERVATION STRATEGY PROJECT 2023-2024

STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION REPORT

Cassie Shaw

Digital Archivist

RMIT University

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INTRODUCTION

At RMIT University, digital records and artefacts are created and kept for legal, compliance, cultural, historical or research purposes.

Digital outputs, online courses and social media have replaced traditional formats, posing new challenges for archiving and preservation. Digital records are more fragile than analogue or paper as a result of outdated file formats, and software or hardware that becomes corrupt, scarce, or inaccessible as technologies evolve and data decay.

Digital archiving, or digital preservation is the practice of ensuring born digital or digitised records and artefacts are accessible for as long as they are needed. It is also about keeping control over the digital estate and thereby creating permission to dispose – what to get rid of and when to get rid of it. Currently there is not the infrastructure or dedicated skilled workforce to support ongoing access to digital materials at RMIT University.

The Digital Preservation Strategy project was initiated in response to Finding #5 in the 2022 Data Lifecycle Management internal audit, which identified a lack of digital preservation policy, strategy and roadmap to ensure the long-term integrity and availability of digital assets.

Ad hoc data management risk mitigation actions have been in place through joint efforts between RMIT Archives and the Data and Analytics team. Nevertheless, due to the fragility of digital records, a strategic and sustainable solution is required. The capability to digitally preserve records for as long as necessary, under the custodianship of RMIT University Archives will ensure compliance with the RMIT Retention and Disposal Authority.,

In April 2023, the Information Governance Board gave approval to draft a strategy that prioritises content of cultural value, as well as legislative compliance requirements defined as:

A Digital Archive Strategy that builds on the strengths of RMIT Library's ability of preserving important cultural events for RMIT and our communities. The strategy will also cater for digital preservation of data in scope for the Information Governance Policy.

A key priority for this project is to define which digital records are in scope for digital preservation, and the course of action for the preservation of those digital records. In order to gather evidence of what digital records are considered to be of value across the university and the current levels of understanding around the management of digital records, a study was conducted. It was informed by the following research questions:

1. What records would you like to have available in 10/20/30 /other years' time (i.e. retained 'temporarily' after current business use has concluded)?
2. How are you currently storing digital information?
3. What are some of the concerns you have about accessing digital files / content in the future?
4. What would you see as the best-case scenario for digital records to be maintained / preserved at RMIT?

METHODOLOGY

The study aimed to develop an understanding of participants' use of records at RMIT in context. A questionnaire was distributed through both broad University and specific College news channels, providing 14 responses. 6 of these surveys were not logged as they represented a group from student services who completed the survey in a team meeting, providing very similar responses. Three focus groups were advertised, with three responses, however due to industrial action, these focus groups were cancelled.

60 semi-structured interviews with 69 participants were then conducted over the course of September and October, 2023. Each interview began with a short slide presentation to provide context for the strategy and clarify participants' understanding of digital preservation.

Participant selection was guided by an aim of gaining in-depth responses from information-rich cases. Purposive sampling of interviewees across the University included information stewards, senior managers and business partners from professional portfolios such as research, governance, communications and IT. Deans, general managers and directors from each of the Schools and Colleges then formed the majority of the academic participants. There was a pleasingly high acceptance rate of interview appointments, with many respondents keen to share their thoughts.

RESULTS

The set of questions posed in the introduction section form the basis for discussing the results.

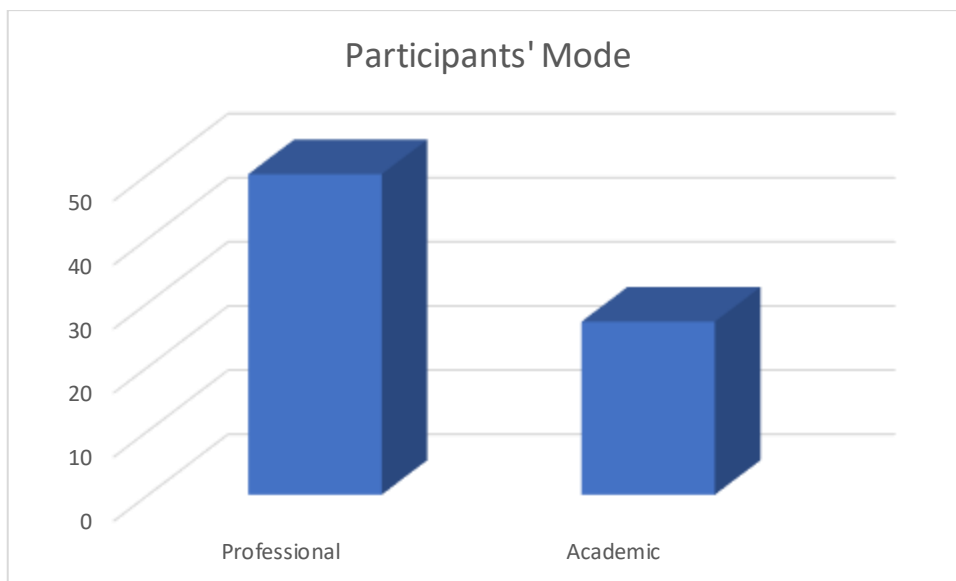


Figure 1 – Mode of participants' work

Participants were contacted from across all portfolios, including the Office of the Vice Chancellor, Education, Finance and Governance, International and Engagement, Research and Innovation, Policy, Strategy and Impact, and Operations. Responses from these participants were categorised as 'Professional'. 'Academic' participants were contacted from each of the Colleges, comprising the College of Business and Law, the College of Design and Social Context, STEM College and the College of Vocational Education. A respondent from RMIT Training was also interviewed. Figure 1 shows the breakdown of participants from the portfolios

and colleges, and Figure 2 shows the breakdown of departments and schools within these areas.

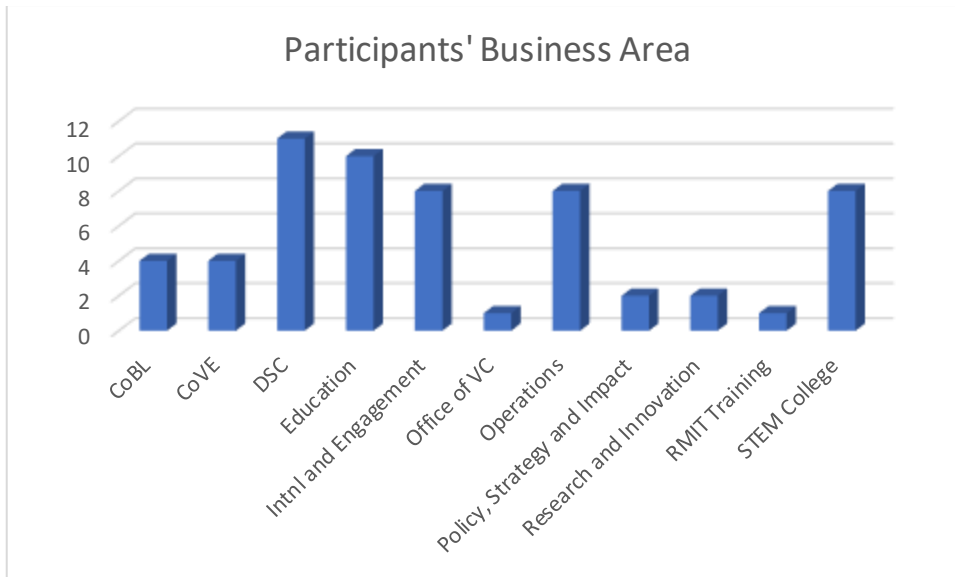


Figure 2 – Area of Business

Records participants would like to have available for the longer term.

Responses to this question fell into eight main categories (see Figure 3), the most referenced being work **outputs**, such as reporting (internal and external), project and partnership documentation, contracts, strategic/operating plans, agreements and approvals and websites and audio/visual products.

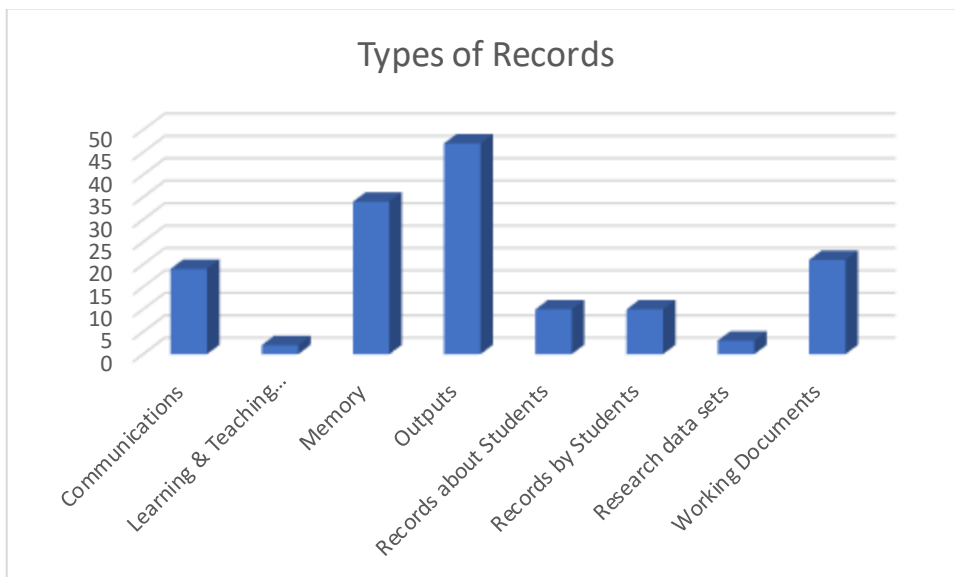


Figure 3 - Records participants would like to have available for the longer term.

Memory items were also commonly referenced, including written and audio/visual records of events, people and milestones; records of current and alumni student and staff experience and

achievements, including records of “the way we do things”. Many respondents offered examples of maintaining these sorts of records in an ad hoc way, expressing their awareness of the potential heritage value of these records, but not knowing how best to maintain them.

Working documentation such as meeting agendas and minutes, release forms and ethics approvals and project management documentation formed a third common category. This was followed by mentions that fell into a **Communications** category, which included newsletters, promotions, news articles and calendars, both internal to RMIT and external.

Records about students, such as student lifecycle documentation and applications, and **records by students**, including outputs such as artworks and portfolios, were also discussed as of value to many respondents. **Learning and teaching documentation** was also mentioned, including course learning, delivery and assessment material, handbooks and course guides. Several respondents mentioned their concerns around losing valuable course details when Canvas rolled over into a new semester, and wanting a way of preserving more than just the subject shell each time.

While research outputs are already stored elsewhere at RMIT, storage and preservation of **research data sets** was discussed by some respondents, with the acknowledgement that their size is a consideration to address.

The **formats** of these records generally fell into common categories, such as docs, spreadsheets, pdfs and slideshows as well as web-based platforms, email and audio/visual formats.

How participants are currently storing information.

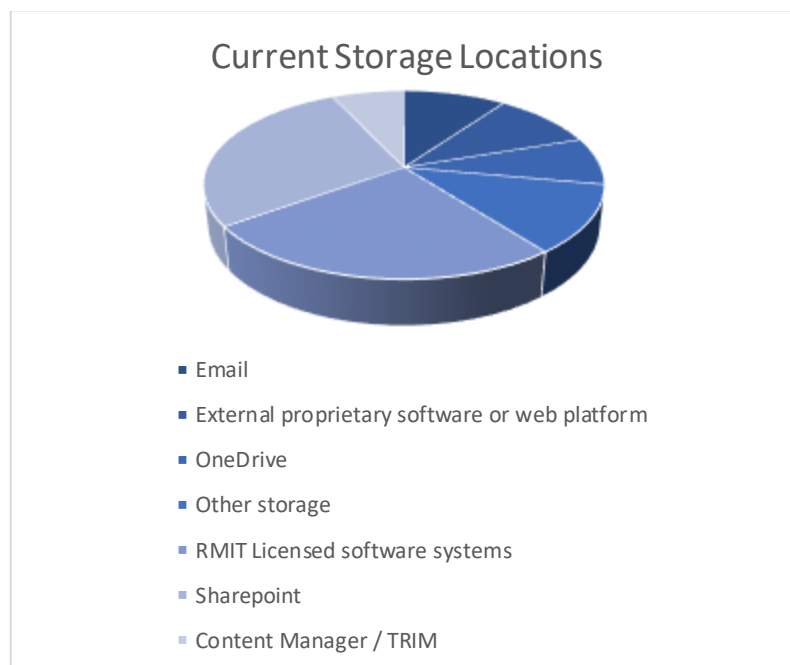


Figure 4 – Current storage locations for records

Responses to this question (See Figure 4) indicated that participants are generally utilising RMIT endorsed storage, such as SharePoint and Teams sites, OneDrive and RMIT licensed software applications, such as Canvas, Adobe products, Salesforce and Content Manager (which was

more commonly referred to as its former name, TRIM). Many participants reflected that they use email accounts to ‘store’ much of their correspondence, as it is searchable.

Personal hard drives such as those on work laptops were mentioned to a lesser extent, with one respondent suggesting they used their hard drive when confidentiality was an issue. There also appeared to be a proliferation of external proprietary software and web platform use, including YouTube, Dropbox, web hosting clients and externally hosted databases.

Concerns participants have about accessing digital records into the future.

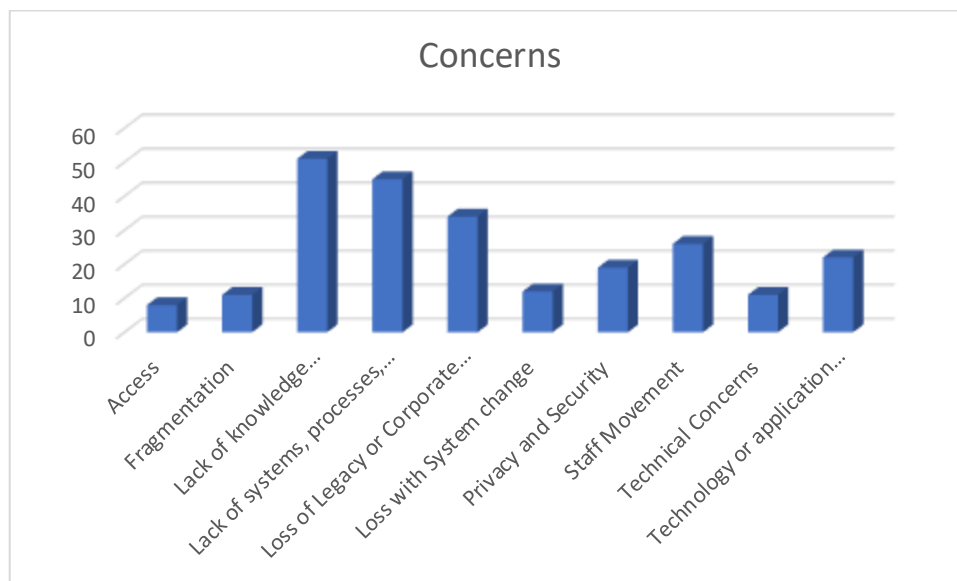


Figure 5 – Concerns respondents have about access and maintenance of digital records into the future.

This question prompted rich discussion with many participants, with the responses falling into eight main categories that encompass considerable overlap between them, as shown in Figure 5. The most common response recognised a **lack of knowledge management**, where responses encompassed concerns around uncertainty to what qualifies as a record, to not knowing how long to retain records for, and lack of consistency and accountability across the University, underpinned by a lack of guidance to improve these. Issues around time and resources for good knowledge management practice were included in this category as well.

This issue was underscored by concern about a **lack of systems, processes and protocols**, wherein many respondents discussed their concerns around the lack of a central repository, as well as protocols for how to manage long-term records, such as naming conventions and taxonomies and where and how to send digital records for archiving. The retention of records in legacy software systems where they could be forgotten about or lost was also included here.

This was merged with numerous concerns about the **loss of records with system change**, such as restructures, and more commonly, when staff leave or move on, and there is no practice in place to manage access to records and their storage locations. Several participants mentioned that there is a reliance on a staff member remembering that records exist, where to find them and retaining access such as passwords.

These issues are all characterised by an overarching concern that both RMIT’s **legacy and corporate knowledge are being lost**. Examples given included history and heritage in evidence

of events, student and alumni achievement, as well as loss of operational memory of practices, projects and knowledge when evidence of work isn't preserved. Respondents spoke of the reputational as well as financial cost of this issue, and several others mentioned the need to better appreciate the huge amount of effort that goes into projects, and the problem of loss of access to valuable ideas and evidence for future reuse and value.

More **technical concerns** fell into the categories of loss/risk with technology/application vulnerabilities, such as accidental deletion or loss of access to external providers, loss through the fragmentation that has occurred where records that were once maintained centrally are now housed in separate software systems with no holistic view of all, and preservation concerns such as format obsolescence, storage options and costs, and sustainability. **Access** was also a common theme, with discussion of finding balance between privacy and cybersecurity and easy access to archived records.

A small percentage of respondents who only work with temporary records expressed no concerns about the long-term availability of their records as they thought the systems in place were working well.

Best-case scenarios for long-term digital record preservation at RMIT.

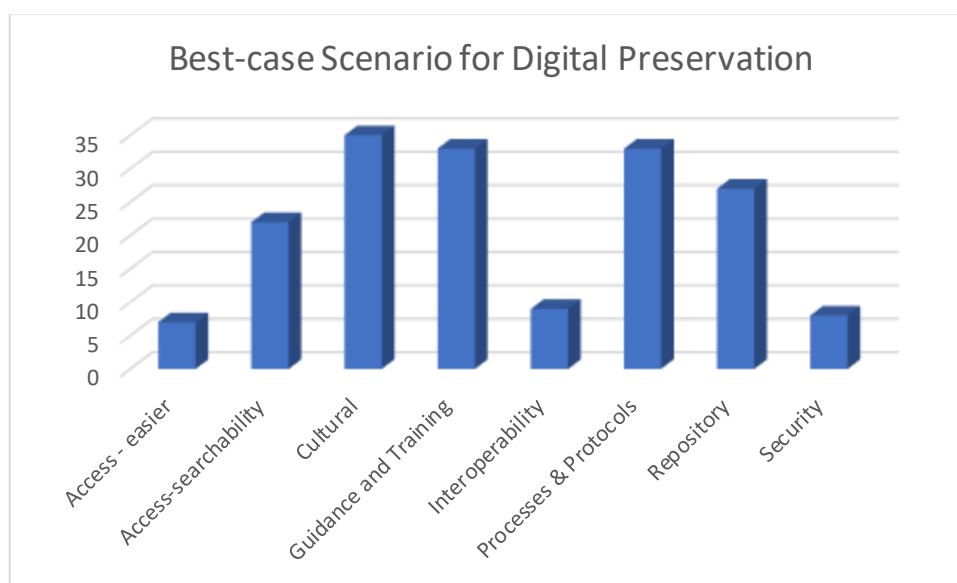


Figure 6 – Respondents' needs and wants for digital preservation

Responses to this question aligned closely with the concerns discussed (See Figure 6), with strong appeals for **guidance and training** for knowledge management, the development and implementation of **processes and protocols** for archiving digital records. The provision of a **searchable central repository** for their storage and preservation was a repeated theme. Again, strong **security** and easy, timely **access** were cited, along with **interoperability** with other RMIT systems.

Many responses fell into a category defined as **cultural**, where participants expressed a desire for change in how long-term records are managed across the University, making the management and preservation of these records part of business-as-usual for RMIT and not just about compliance. Consistency and better communication around responsibilities and

processes were discussed as a lens for long-term preservation as a form of respect for the work and legacy of the University and its staff.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to gather data about the types of digital assets in existence at RMIT and what staff know about digital archiving, in order to inform the drafting of a digital preservation strategy at the university. The use of semi-structured, one-on-one interview/discussions was a highly valuable method that yielded a great deal of rich information. While it is important to underscore that the frequency of the results isn't exact due to the sampling method used, the responses displayed consistency in the themes that arose.

The high degree of interest and enthusiasm for the project was evident in the number of respondents who expressed appreciation that a strategy was underway, and the accompanying strong indications that staff would like to be employing best practice with long-term records and are asking for guidance and support. This is reflected in responses such as,

“...we talk about records management as being one of our areas of vulnerability ... we're always on the lookout for training support, guidance on how and where to do things”.

While individuals and separate business units have developed ad hoc systems for managing and maintaining their records, the call for clarity and consistency of process was apparent. The development of the strategy offers a valuable opportunity to acknowledge and frame the systems and protocols necessary for digital preservation and provide the support that respondents consistently cited as a need.

Safeguarding of legacy and concerns around institutional memory loss were other drivers behind respondents' engagement with the project. Example responses that exemplify this include:

“I think there are a lot of people who work here who care very dearly about what they do, even though it might just involve course codes and stuff like that...”

"...the legacy that we would want RMIT to have is something that allows RMIT to say here's how we fostered an ethical and responsible culture of undertaking research and innovation"

"...it's something I think is not only important economically [in terms of time wasted], but also in terms of OH&S - the amount of frustration and stress."

The frequency of discussion around loss of access to records when staff retired, resigned or changed roles is significant here; without strategy in place, respondents cited responses ranging from frustration to distress at the losses incurred with lack of access to legacy SharePoint sites, external websites and those who remember what has occurred in the past. Regarding the retirement of a College general manager, one participant responded, “...he obviously was the one that institutional knowledge with his departure and that tacit knowledge. And so ... it would be good if we could have a system where we could keep all of our records for things like that”.

While there was significant focus on the non-material aspects of long-term recordkeeping, there was also substantial support specifically for a centralised repository for digital records.

While there were varying levels of understanding about what this would look like, the terms ‘searchable’, ‘access’ and ‘easy’ were commonly used in discussions about how to transfer, find and retrieve records held in such a repository:

“So it's like if it's, it doesn't have to be curated, but if there's a place that people could go and look through that kind of stuff and potentially use, I think that would be the best-case scenario.”

“I think that's what we will need to have with the digital record management to have like consistency of where the information will be and easy ways of retrieving that information. So that it makes it easy for everyone to actually locate the information (and) start sharing the knowledge. Because sometimes if you don't have the knowledge, then you can't have the resources.”

Regardless of whether a new management system becomes part of next steps for the project, or further investment in the use of the existing systems is preferable, an investigation into the investment into an archival repository that provides a balance between access and security for the University's digital records is a worthwhile consideration.

It is also worth noting the positive interactions with ITS, who expressed a desire to work with the strategy team to aid success. There was discussion around the use of the current 'in-place' records management system, which would nominally make it easier for archiving, in that everything sits in its system of creation (such as Salesforce, SAMS or Content Manager) until the move to a digital archive is required. There was mention of the development of a ‘map’ that outlines the storage locations of different types records, which would also aid the issue of fragmentation. However current limitations in knowledge management are strong influences on the success of this approach.

Communication and support around the implementation of the strategy will be vital. One of the major challenges for digital preservation is in its relative newness and the absence of understanding around what it entails. Inherent in the strategy review and dissemination cycle is the value of profile-building and advocacy for the embedding of the work as an ongoing program. The data collected in this research points to a real need that a solutions-based strategy can begin to address, offering support and education enterprise-wide.

These opinions are tempered by an acknowledgement from several respondents that the appetite for ‘extra’ work involved in preparing records for transfer to Archives varies wildly, especially among the academic staff. Clarity around well-communicated and simple processes for business units to move digital records to Archives will be essential and could help change the perception that digital preservation is too time-consuming and difficult.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- A comprehensive feedback process for the Digital Preservation Strategy throughout the drafting process to foster positive engagement
- Enact a strong plan for communication – both in terms of education around the importance and urgency of digital preservation, and around how BAU processes and protocols can be implemented to aid ease of transfer of appropriate records. Clarity and consistency of language will also be key

- Begin research into a more accessible repository for the preservation of digital records, whether in terms of further investment into better utilising the current system, or looking into sourcing a new one designed for the needs of RMIT University Archives.

CONCLUSION

The Information Governance Board's endorsement of the need for a digital preservation strategy for RMIT is an acknowledgement that, in an environment of exponentially growing data, digital archiving is an urgent issue for the University. The evidence added by the rich responses in this research underscores the merit of a strategy that aids the development and campus-wide adoption of the specific actions, procedures and facilities for preserving, retrieving and delivering digital assets of enduring value.

The data gathered about current digital records practices, challenges, opportunities, and needs shows there is a strong appetite within both the academic and professional areas of the university for action to address concerns around digital archiving processes and protocols, knowledge management, cultural and corporate legacy, privacy and security and technology.

RMIT University has a responsibility to work towards better preserving RMIT's digital assets of enduring value, safeguarding our corporate and cultural legacy into and for the future, and a clear, evidence-based, well-communicated digital preservation strategy is a vital first step.