

## The Risk of

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# NOT TAKING RISKS

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Eight information professionals describe the lessons they learned and the payoffs they received from taking risks as they traveled their career paths – paths that helped lead to their induction into the ARMA International Company of Fellows.

*April Dmytrenko, CRM, FAI*



The game of Risk provided my very early introduction to taking calculated risks. This board game, which was invented in the 1950s by a French film director on a holiday vacation, combines strategy, statistical analysis, and diplomacy with colored dice and some luck. The game can last for hours or even days while players strategically calculate the risks of each move toward their goal of occupying all the world territories to win. Players must either conquer or be conquered.

While risk taking in the world of information governance (IG) and records and information management (RIM) does not have the same goal of “world domination,” the board game certainly provided me valuable insights on calculated risk taking, strategy-based decision making, and the advantage of being patient. It also taught me:

- There are many ways to accomplish one’s goals; the path is not always linear.
- It is important to consider your opponents’ and alliance partners’ perspectives.
- Thinking creatively is essential.
- Pay attention to the “big-picture” landscape.
- Sometimes you just have to boldly take action.
- Own the outcome and learn from it. Risk taking has always been part of the human experience. For example, the prehistoric discovery of fire and how to harness it for use certainly had inherent risks. As another example, taking strategic risks has been the foundation of political and military tactics throughout history – much like in the board game that introduced me to the value of taking calculated risks.

## Lessons from Fellow Risk Takers

Risk takers know that not everyone is like them, but they don’t really understand why. They know that *not* taking risks is a risk in itself, and life is so much more interesting when taking risks – strategic risks, that is.

As a risk taker, I openly admit to bumps along the way or full-out failures. But I see them as the ultimate learning experience and oddly value them more than my successes due to the insights. As they say, “No pain, no gain.” It’s safe to say the 54 members of ARMA International’s Company of Fellows (FAIs) have taken many risks in their careers and had their fair share of both. Following are some of our stories of taking strategic risks in our careers.

### Fred Diers, FAI #9



clear that the best practices approach I was recommend-

In 2014 I was hired by a global technology organization to establish a company-wide information governance (IG) program. I laid out for my client, the general counsel, the framework components and made

ing would realize a great deal of internal change. The project was greenlit, and the work was completed. However, when I provided the roadmap, policies, procedures, and other deliverables, my client abruptly halted the project due to the amount of change it would require for the organization.

My work allowed me great insights into the company, and I knew the tremendous benefits the IG program would help the company realize. So, I took a risk. Over the next two years I followed up with my client, justifying the business need and holistic value of the program. I strategically, and with patience, timed my discussions with the general counsel. Finally, I was informed the project was going forward and that my continuing advice guided them to the decision they should have moved forward with from the beginning. My risk also paid off with an enriched relationship as my client’s trusted advisor.

### Jim Coulson, FAI #15



Taking a position as vice president of worldwide marketing at a global RIM company necessitated a family move from Toronto to Boston. For two years I worked very hard, traveled incessantly, and brought results, thinking this would guarantee success. When this company was acquired by a larger conglomerate, I found myself out of a job.

The situation would have been bad under any circumstances, but it also meant I no longer had a valid visa to work in the United States. I had to decide whether I should retreat to Toronto and pick up a corporate position there or take the risk of my life and establish a consulting firm in Boston. I chose the latter.

By carefully conserving my severance, securing yearly visas until I qualified for a green card, and attracting some very talented consultants, I began to prosper with this new company. Almost 15 years later, I sold this company, my colleagues and I joined the new firm, and we went on to develop a global RIM practice. Risk, it seems, is often a product of necessity, but when combined with hard work and a capable support network, it can yield the most satisfying results you can imagine.

### April Dmytrenko, FAI #17



After establishing myself as a career RIM professional I felt I needed to understand IT better. I decided to jump jobs and took a business systems analyst position. It was a step backwards in position level and salary, and after managing a team I was now being managed.

My calculated decision, I hoped, would not only enrich my skill set, but could springboard my RIM career. That little voice reminded me that the risk could impact my ability to continue my RIM career at the pace I had

set, and I might struggle to recover. Further, I thought my resume may appear confusing.

But, taking this risk actually provided me more than I could have imagined. I left that job feeling “at one” with IT. I also grasped that while one of IT’s goals is to build the system *right*, without the affected business units’ input, it is very easy to build the *wrong* system: back end good – front end not.

To this day, I seek out the business side’s involvement in the decision making, as it usually leads to success and establishes great partnerships.

### **Christine Ardern, FAI #26**



In preparation for *back office centralization* – which in financial organization lingo means all paper is brought into one location to manage it – the bank I worked for decided to do a pilot project removing all customer files and inactive records across many branches in a small community.

As manager of the RIM program and the records centers across the country, I volunteered with my RIM team to work in the pilot branches to determine the impact of the project and assess the RIM storage requirements. We completed the project, identified some issues and opportunities that would impact the planned rollout, and were able to develop some strategies to manage future storage needs.

Unfortunately, the senior vice president of corporate governance, to whom we reported, felt our team working in the branch offices made the team too operational for his management group. So, when he was asked to downsize his group, he determined that we should look for positions outside of the bank.

As the saying goes, “When one door closes, another opens.” I chose to go into consulting, which I have loved doing for more than 20 years. So there are no risks – just opportunities that can be a bit scary!

### **Patrick Cunningham, FAI #43**



While serving as Motorola’s first director of records management, I was moved from the law department to information security. At first, I wasn’t very happy about the move. But the chief information security officer (CISO) extolled the virtues of working in information security with the key observation, “If I don’t know what information we have, I can’t protect it.”

What followed was a rapidly expanding portfolio of responsibilities – that the CISO would call “opportunities” – across the entire gamut of what I came to understand as “information governance.” Taking on these responsibilities was a huge risk. I was out of my comfort zone almost every time a new “opportunity” came my

way. My staff grew, my responsibilities grew, and my visibility grew. As the company downsized, I managed to maintain and grow my responsibilities.

Ultimately, though, the company made some difficult personnel decisions, and I found myself with an unplanned sabbatical in a desert of few records management jobs. But taking the risk and growing myself into a new field of endeavor – information security – has opened a new expanse of opportunity, where I finally landed an IT policy governance role at a major bio-pharmaceutical company.

### **David McDermott, FAI #44**



While serving on the ARMA International Board of Directors, I was approached about running for the position of board president. I understood the scope of the role and responsibilities that went with the position, and self-doubt and the fear of failure had me petrified.

Though I have an outgoing personality today, back then I was quite the introvert. The thought of speaking in meetings, let alone to the membership, was scary, and the thought of leading the association was daunting. I looked at my mentors and believed there was no way I could fill their shoes. The more I tried to convince myself not to run, the more I knew I had to face my fears and take a huge risk. I woke up one morning and said, “Self! I am going to do this.”

Serving as the ARMA International president was scary, but I was fortunate to have a great board that allowed me to develop as a leader. I also really evolved as a RIM and business professional, and I am so happy I pushed myself to move out of my comfort zone and take the biggest risk of my career at the time.

### **Galina Datskovsky, FAI #48**



As I was finishing up my doctoral work in computer science, I was contemplating taking a position in a university or a research giant such as IBM or Bell Laboratories. There was also an option to start a small business with two other graduate students. Doing that would be a very risky move, as most startups fail. A job in a solid institution would be the safe decision, as it would provide stability and a solid income. I thought quite a bit about the downstream risks, but since I did not yet have kids or other obligations, I decided to take the entrepreneurial plunge.

We formed MDY Advanced Technologies, which developed FileSurf, a records management product that was successful for a number of years. Being in the field brought me to ARMA and made my life richer in that fashion. I also learned a tremendous amount about run-

ning a company, including about venture funding and exit strategies. We successfully exited by selling MDY to CA, and I had the opportunity to run business units for giant corporations. The entrepreneurial risk I took has led to a most exciting and rewarding career ever since.

#### **Susan Goodman FAI, #53**



While working as a RIM senior vice president for a large, highly regulated financial services firm, I was invited to present a case study at an international conference. The case study focused on how our team

established the firm's electronic records management program. Even though I had the firm's support, I recognized the risks of publicizing a program that was not yet fully implemented, and then there was the potential exposure and scrutiny by the regulators. At the time, few organizations had electronic records management programs; it was new territory.

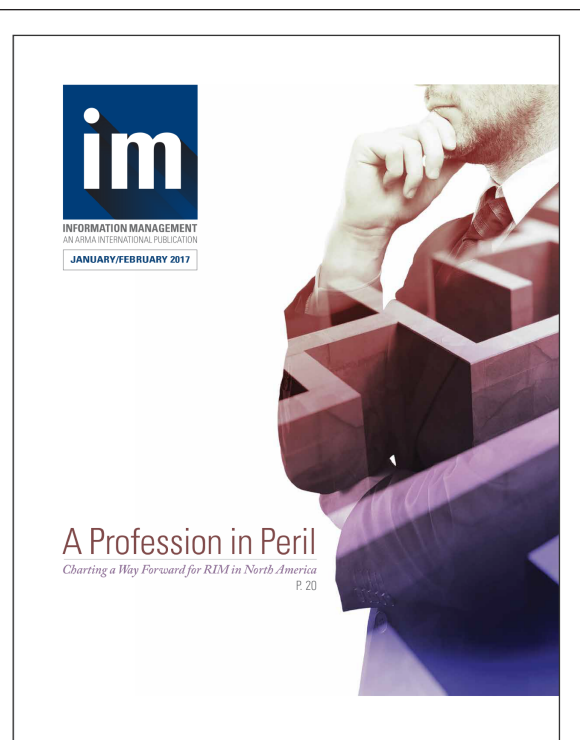
I relied on key ISO standards and industry guidelines and incorporated them into the program. Taking the risks allowed us to demonstrate the firm's forward thinking, business and technical savvy, dedication to regulatory and legal compliance, and due diligence. It enabled the company to be seen as the front-runner in this space and to set precedent. Our approach was viewed as a model for other firms. Personally, the risk I took boosted my self-confidence and validated the thorough and strategic approach I take in my work.

### **The Road Less Traveled**

Bravo to the risk-takers! To those readers who are risk averse, I close with the opening and closing lines from "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost: "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and sorry I could not travel both...I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference." **E**



**About the Author:** April Dmytrenko, CRM, FAI, is a recognized thought leader in information governance and compliance, a C-level strategist as both a practitioner and consultant, and a successful change agent. The speaker and author was inducted into ARMA International's Company of Fellows in 1993, served as the group's chair for many years, and is currently serving as a contributing editor for *Information Management* magazine. Dmytrenko can be contacted at [April2018SAI@gmail.com](mailto:April2018SAI@gmail.com).



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