



Can you provide a user-friendly definition of metadata for non-records people?

Answer:

Ok, so you've finally wrapped your head around what "data" is (information), and now you're expected to know what "metadata" is and how it relates to data. Not to worry.

ARMA International's Metadata-Related Definitions

Here are definitions of metadata and related terms from ARMA International's *Glossary of Records and Information Management Terms, 5th Ed.* (ARMA International TR22-2016):

metadata – The structured information that describes, explains, locates, or otherwise makes it easier to retrieve, use, or manage information resources. Note: Metadata is typically broken down into broad types that include, but are not limited, to administrative meta-data, content metadata, descriptive metadata, preservation metadata, and structural metadata.

See also audit trail metadata, contextual information, embedded metadata, and vendor-added metadata

audit trail metadata – Protected metadata documenting record activity, including information about when and by whom a specific record was created, changed, or deleted.

contextual information – The data about the creation, receipt, storage, or use of a document and its relationship to other records.

embedded metadata – The metadata maintained and stored within the object it describes; the opposite of stand-alone metadata.

vendor-added metadata – Any metadata created and maintained by a vendor as a result of processing the document.

The Importance of Metadata for Information Management

Without proper metadata, a record may not be retrievable or may be improperly handled. Metadata also assists in maintaining the integrity and authenticity of records. The increasing use of electronic means to store records and information objects brings with it the need for more ways to identify records and information, including format, retrievability, and classification. Within the context of RIM practices, metadata plays an important role. RIM-related metadata aids in the facilitation and implementation of the organization's information processing activities and records management policies.

Excerpted from Metadata: A Basic Tutorial for Records Managers (ARMA TR03-2009)

Metadata is basically information attached to data that helps to better describe the data and provides additional information to help the data be conveyed and used in the way in which it is intended to be used.

For example, I just sent a friend an e-mail about our plans next weekend. The information contained in the e-mail is the data you're now so familiar with: We're going sailing, I'm supposed to bring potato salad, etcetera. Everything else attached to that e-mail is metadata: the routing information, the source for the e-mail, the e-mail system used, the time and date the e-mail was created, the amount of data in the e-mail, and so on.

Each piece of metadata attached to the e-mail I just sent provides additional information that may be used to route the e-mail, to provide information about how the e-mail was created, to authenticate the e-mail, to provide receipt for the e-mail, to provide a return address, and much, much more.

Without the attached metadata, this e-mail would just sit on my computer with nowhere to go and nobody to read it except me. So, while the data in the e-mail is really important (think potato salad), the metadata attached to it (think addressee and all that other information) is equally important.

Can't wait to make that potato salad! **E**

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