In the Digital World, think first before you send that email or attach that document!!

If you don't know about metadata, you should! Metadata says a lot about you and what you've been doing. In today's electronic age you have to think first before sending electronic communications or data. You may be sending more information than you see on your screen! In situations where privacy is concerned (Healthcare, Legal, Financial, Copyright, Trademark, etc.) you may even be liable for the data you unintentionally distribute.

Metadata is data about data. All our electronic communications and files contain some metadata. Metadata can include information about who made a file, where it was saved on your hard drive, when it was created, what changes have been made to it, where it came from and how many times it has been opened. And depending on the type of electronic file or communication, metadata can store a lot more information! Microsoft World documents that have track changes turned on maintain all the changes that have been made to a document within the original file. Emails also contain information in their hidden headers about where an email originated from (your home computer, office, on vacation in Aruba, etc.), what servers it was routed through, when the email was sent, what program was used to create the email (Outlook Express, Eudora, etc.) etc. Computers themselves house tons of metadata from all your electronic activities such as web browsing, and what files you have opened, viewed or changed.

So now that I have sufficiently freaked you out, you're probably wondering what you should do about it? The first step is to just be aware of the way things work in the digital world. We are all very comfortable with our physical, observable word. If I told you that there was evidence that you had gone to the post office today, someone saw you, you signed for express shipping, your footprints were found in the dirt outside, you would not be surprised. We must all develop that same level of comfort and awareness with the rules that govern the digital world.

Here are some basic Rules to live by in the Digital world:
1. Nothing is private or secure unless specifically intended and stated. You should expect that everything you do by email or on the Internet is subject to prying eyes.
2. Digital documents always contain a lot more information than what you necessarily see on the screen.
3. All your actions and activities in the digital world (on your computer, on the internet, etc.) are recorded somewhere.
4. The sheer mass of the digital world (Trillions of transactions, logs, files, metadata, etc.) dictate that most of your actions and activities in the digital world go unnoticed, just like in the physical world.
5. Digital data has a relatively short time to live, as compared to the physical word. Logs become refreshed, hard drives fail and are destroyed, file formats become outmoded, and digital magnetic and optical media degrade.

So how do I remove metadata from my digital documents and ensure privacy where needed?

1. Use built in tools:
    a. MS Office XP(2002)/2003 has built-in tools for removing some metadata. However, you must download the plug-in from Microsoft.
        i. Download the MS Plug-in Software: http://www.microsoft.com/downloads/details.aspx?familyid=144e54ed-d43e-42ca-bc7b-5446d34e5360&displaylang=en
        ii. Known issues
            1. http://support.microsoft.com/kb/834636/
            2. http://support.microsoft.com/kb/842684/
        iii. Helpful Directions: http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/assistance/HA011400341033.aspx
    b. MS Office 2004 (Mac) has some built-in functionality to remove metadata
        i. Within Word, go to Preferences>Security and select enable "Remove personally identifiable information   from the file on save" and "Warn before printing, saving or sending a document that contains tracked changes or comments"
    c. Corel WorldPerfect does not have any built-in tools for removing metadata, however Corel version 12 has a built-in Save to PDF format, which will remove most metadata except author information. You may also save to RTF file format as described below.
2. Convert your Word documents to file formats that are well documented and clearly describe what metadata is included (Ex. PDF and RTF)
    a. You can generate PDFs from any program you can print from by using conversion utilities. PDF documents have several advantages over other document formats. They can be read on any computer or OS platform (Linux, Windows, Mac, etc.) using the freely available Acrobat Reader, they maintain a documents formatting, and by default they contain limited metadata. Be careful, some PDF publishing programs such as Adobe's full Acrobat software can add a lot of metadata including comments, author, etc.
        i. PDF995 for Windows $10 – Inexpensive PDF publisher for simple document PDF creation – www.pdf995.com
        ii. Mac OSX has a free built-in PDF printer accessible through the printer dialog box
        iii. Acrobat 7.0 Standard Windows & Mac $299 – Full featured PDF publisher for editing, creating forms, commenting, digitally signing PDF documents – www.adobe.com
        iv. PDF Converter Professional Windows $99 – Full featured PDF publisher for editing, creating forms, commenting, digitally signing PDF documents – http://www.nuance.com/pdfconverter/
    b. You can save files to RTF format, which are well documented, cross platform and have almost no metadata included other than author information. All word processors (MS Word, WordPerfect, StarOffice, OpenOffice, etc.) can generate RTF files by selecting Save As from the File menu. RTF files will preserve most of your formatting, but not all including table and graphics.

3. You can also use third party metadata scrubbing products (Windows & MS Office Only)
    a. Metadata Assistant for Windows Microsoft Office documents $79 - http://www.payneconsulting.com/products/metadataretail/
    b. Met Data Reviewer for Windows Microsoft Office documents $20 - http://www.princetonsoftwarecompany.com/pr_mdr.htm
    c. ezClean for Windows Mircosoft Office documents - http://www.kklsoftware.com/index.asp
    d. Work Share Protect - http://www.workshare.com/products/wsprotect/

It is important that you learn what the rules of the digital world mean for your business or practice. In this case, ignorance is not bliss, so you must stay educated and deliberate in your use of electronic tools.

Helpful links
    1. http://www.truste.org/consumers/education.php
    2. http://www.discoveryresources.org/04_om_electronic_discoverers_0405.html
    3. http://www.cert.org/homeusers/email_postcard.html
    4. http://www.ziplip.com/products/ZLCommunicationPortal.html
    5. http://www.pgp.com/