Archival Media Preservation

How to Choose a Stable File Format

Archivists have special needs when it comes to choosing a file format for storage. We have all heard of or endured the nightmares of file format obsolescence. There are no guarantees when it comes to file format longevity, but here are some tips to help you choose a file format that stands a chance of still being readable in a few years.

Consider your needs. Are there legal or other requirements that make it necessary to preserve the document in an unedited version? Is it important to retain the formatting or structure of a document or is the preservation of the content the primary concern? If your requirements dictate that a format must retain the original presentation or associated metadata, you may not be able to use an open source format as a replacement.

Don't be an early adopter. Wait for a file format to become widely adopted before converting all of your files. When a file format becomes commonly used by a variety of software manufacturers, it stands a better chance of long-term survival.

Investigate your potential new file format. Check user groups & forums for their comments about the format. Talk to colleagues that have taken the leap to see if they have encountered any difficulties.

Check the reputation of the format's originator. Is the format proprietary or open source? If proprietary, is the company stable and reliable for support questions that may occur? Is the format compatible with previous versions? Will it continue to be compatible with future software versions? If the vendor has a history of discontinuing support for previous software versions or formats, can you afford to continue updating to new versions in the future?

Take time to consider your options carefully. What looks like a stable format today can easily be made obsolete by advances in technology. Keep track of new trends in technology to stay aware of your future migration needs.

Sources
http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/selecting_file_formats.pdf
http://www.nedcc.org/resources/leaflets/6Reformatting/05DigitalPreservation.php