Keeping your data clean

By Llewellyn le Hané 9 Jan 2018

We've all been there. Trying to add someone's contact details to your phone only to see that the SIM or the phone memory is full. Now comes the painful decision...'who do I delete so this new contact can be saved?'

© Jakub Jirsak via 123RF

Then you realise that, whilst scrolling through your contact list, you have a multitude of duplicates in your phone taking up valuable memory space.

This got me thinking. If my private phone with a couple of hundred contacts already has duplicates and multiple entries for the same person, how do companies, the government, and large institutions keep the contact details of their stakeholders or customers and clients clean?

What happens when someone passes away, does their data immediately get wiped from the system, or do they still continue to receive letters, invoices, or perhaps payments? Does each organisation have a singular method of inputting contact details and does everyone in the organisation adhere to this method?

As I again look at my phone, I see my mother has five entries for the same phone number with names ranging from Mum, Grandmother. I freed up for spaces in my phone by simply using one version of her name from now on.
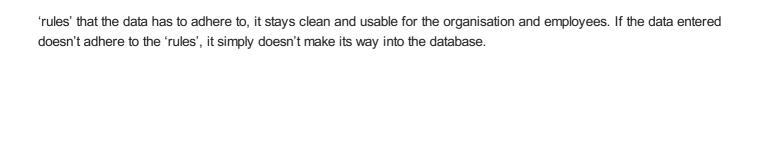
Cleaning data

Within the public and private and ICT-sector it is actually called cleaning data. To keep information clean an unduplicated is essential.

Imagine a large organisation with perhaps one million or more entries of contact data on their systems. It needs to be able to find a person's details within seconds, rather than minutes or hours. This, of course, cannot be done manually as it would be an all-consuming task that would take hundreds of people.

Creating 'rules'

The good news is that there is actually software to help companies with this. It keeps data clean and by simply creating

'rules' that the data has to adhere to, it stays clean and usable for the organisation and employees. If the data entered doesn't adhere to the 'rules', it simply doesn't make its way into the database.

Mistakes are easily made and different people approach entering contact details in different ways. Various branches of the same company might already approach data-entry in different ways.

For example; first names in last name fields and vice versa, phone numbers in email fields, using a nickname, or simply not having all the necessary data.

The cost of duplicates

The permutations of filling in someone's contact details are endless. This, however, is how data becomes tainted and incomplete and inaccurate. It means when you are trying to contact someone or send out a letter, just like my five entries for my mother, you may have five duplicates. Imagine the expense of sending out the same letter to one person who appears in five different ways in a database. So, an essential principle for clean databases is one record per customer. The more duplicates you have, the less effective any of your stakeholder communication will be.

Even more costly and potentially open to fraud, abuse and corruption, is the appearance of non-existent people in your databases. Imagine having people on the payroll that left the company months or years ago. Or as happened recently right here in Namibia, uncovering several 'ghost teachers', that were on a payroll, but didn't actually exist, but did receive a salary. Strict policies on data entry and upkeep ensure there's less chance of fraud, malfeasance and detection if any fraud is being attempted.

A continuous process

Keeping your data clean is a continuous process and at the very basis of customer relationship management and stakeholder engagement at all levels. It's also not just something that technically innovative organisations should be doing.

Every organisation with a database needs to embrace clean data.

Just remember how embarrassed you get when you send a text or a WhatsApp message to someone by mistake because you didn't differentiate between the two Jonathans in your address book.

Keeping your phone data clean is worth the time and effort and in organisations, keeping your data clean is not just worth your time and effort but it will improve your business processes and probably save the company money.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Llewellyn le Hané is the director of Green Enterprise Solutions