

# BETWEEN THE LINES

TAPPING THE POTENTIAL OF  
21ST CENTURY DOCUMENTS

by John M. Kelly

“What are documents?  
They are, quite simply,  
talking things.”

David M. Levy\*

## A Short History of the World's Most Successful Communications Vehicle

The dividing line between history and prehistory is determined by one thing: writing. Where do you find writing? In documents—whether cave stones, papyrus or clusters of electronic signals.

In a very real sense, the earliest documents were Bronze Age business records. They replaced fallible human memory with a new means of preserving accounting information, locking it in a physical container. And they performed brilliantly.

But documents quickly assumed other important roles. As writing evolved from symbols and numbers into systems that emulated spoken language, documents became our representatives and agents—capturing the human voice, communicating information, establishing rules and regulations, providing education and pointing the way toward the future. In fact, the word “document” comes from the Latin root word *docere*, which means “to teach.”

Of course, the nature of documents has changed many times over the millennia, reflecting important advancements in technology. But the role of documents has remained surprisingly immutable. They still help us:

- Remember
- Communicate
- Educate, direct and inspire
- Analyze information
- Think and invent
- Shape our future

In short, they help define who we are, while influencing what we will become.

### **Proof That Documents Can Change the World**

A few years ago, the U.S. National Archives and Record Administration teamed up with *U.S. News & World Report*® and National History Day to identify the 100 milestone documents in U.S. history.<sup>1</sup>

Here's the top 10 list based on votes from almost 40,000 Americans:

- Declaration of Independence
- Constitution of the United States
- Bill of Rights
- Louisiana Purchase Treaty
- Emancipation Proclamation
- 19th Amendment: Women's Right to Vote
- 13th Amendment: Abolition of Slavery
- Gettysburg Address
- Civil Rights Act
- Social Security Act

In addition to treaties, court decisions and legislation, the rest of the list includes some unexpected treasures:

- Thomas Edison's patent application for the light bulb
- The Manhattan Project notebook
- The check for the purchase of Alaska
- The patent for the cotton gin
- The transcript of John Glenn's official communication with the NASA Command Center in 1962

Who is to say what might appear on the list 50 years from now? Emails between national leaders? WikiLeaks documents? The first Facebook® page?

Clearly, there is a strong connection between documents and history. But the role documents play is more than just record keeper. After all, many of the 100 milestone documents changed history. Michael Barone of *U.S. News and World Report* put it this way:

It's not an exaggeration to say that without these seminal papers, our country might not exist—and certainly would not in its current form.<sup>2</sup>

Documents have had the same momentous impact on virtually every country and continent. Add up history's most important documents and you get a "big bang" effect.

"It is no accident that all our social institutions—including science, law and government, religion, education and the arts, commerce and administration—rely on the stabilizing power of documents to accomplish their ends," writes David Levy, a computer scientist and former staff member of the world-famous Palo Alto Research Center, in *Scrolling Forward: Making Sense of the Document in the Digital Age*.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, documents are so essential to human history that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) launched an international effort to preserve the world's document heritage in 1992.

UNESCO's ambitious Memory of the World project encompasses documents, photographs, maps and multimedia from dozens of countries. Its official register includes the writings of Simon Bolivar, the diaries of Anne Frank, the archives of the Hudson's Bay Company, traditional music from China, 19th century photographs from Latin America, and the Original Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizens from France.

No doubt about it. Documents are intimately involved in every facet of civilization. Which means that that they are undeniably critical to business success.

### **Shaping the Modern Enterprise**

Even in their earliest days, documents were business drivers. In fact, the company that is believed to be the world's oldest corporation, the copper mining firm Stora Kopparberg, came into existence in 1347 because of a document—a charter from Sweden's King Magnus IV.<sup>4</sup> And a royal charter in 1670 drove the incorporation of the aforementioned Hudson's Bay Company.<sup>5</sup>

Documents quickly moved from sanctioning companies to shaping them, evident in everything from the maps of the early fur traders to the first Articles of Incorporation. As distribution of printed materials became easier and cheaper, documents were readily—and deeply—integrated into all aspects of commercial operations.

Look behind any major business advancement in 19th and 20th century America and you'll uncover critical printed materials: The shares that funded the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. The sewing patterns of New England's textile mills. The bill of sale that proved ownership of a Model T. The architectural drawings of early skyscrapers. The construction contract for ENIAC, the first general-purpose computer.

The growth of the modern enterprise would have been severely stunted without the ability to create, print and distribute documents, no matter how simple. Picture the expansion of American commerce without train schedules and tickets. Or the impact of Sears without the Sears Catalog. Or the success of the New York Stock Exchange without stock certificates. Or the expansion of Google® and Yahoo® without documents of any kind.

Once merely a testament to the existence of a commercial enterprise, documents are now virtually inseparable from businesses themselves, infiltrating all levels and functions. As a consequence, the opportunities they harbor can be leveraged enterprise-wide. If you know where to find them.

**Endnotes**

1. Michael Barone, "The People's Vote: 100 Documents that Shaped America," *U.S. News & World Report*, February 17, 2011
2. Ibid.
3. David Levy, *Scrolling Forward: Making Sense of the Document in the Digital Age* (Arcade Publishing, November 2001)
4. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stora\\_Enso](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stora_Enso)
5. Hudson's Bay Company, *Our History*, <http://www2.hbc.com/hbc/history/>