

“So much of life takes place in the devices ...”

An estate planning guide for digital data

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Nowadays, digital data are a substantial part of a legacy. Estate planning for digital data is crucial that the bereaved can act in the event of death. This guide advocates for integrating digital estate planning as a lived practice in everyday life.

In the quote in the title, an interview participant of my research points out why access to digital legacies is important for the bereaved: “Because so much of life takes place in the devices ...”. The quote underlines that a digital legacy is not only an archive of important documents but also an essential resource for mourning and remembrance (see *bestattungskultur* 6.2020). Particularly intimate and everyday digital records of the life lived can be valuable for mourning but also problematic.

If user credentials are unknown, all memories may be lost. If access is possible, it is important for the bereaved to preserve the privacy of those deceased—even posthumously. However, if

their wishes are unknown, the bereaved do not know what they are allowed to access. If data reveal an unknown side of the deceased, this can be supportive for mourning work, e.g. to understand a suicide, but it can also cause a critical break in the mourning process. Digital estate planning not only helps to organise legal matters but also enables mourning and remembrance in a tough time.

In principle, digital estate planning can be considered in a will, but this does not meet the dynamics of the digital world. Thus, it should be integrated as a lived practice in everyday life. The following guide outlines how this can be done with little effort.

Data minimisation

This principle of the General Data Protection Regulation can also be applied to the storage of personal data. This is not a culturally pessimistic call to eschew the selfie or a lively exchange in a messenger because it is precisely these records that can be valuable one day. What is meant, however, is to question automatic and unreflective storage. WhatsApp, for example, allows you to decide for each contact if messages will be deleted automatically after 7 days. Other messengers can also give priority to forgetting or it is standard, as with Snapchat. If you want to keep certain data without giving access to heirs, apps like LOCKED can encrypt pictures or videos on the smartphone. On the computer, for example, a folder can be encrypted with AxCrypt or a USB stick with BitLocker.

Share only important accounts

We constantly create new user accounts, change passwords or devices. Since only a few platforms, e.g. Facebook, allow us to specify what should happen to our data after we die, we have to pass on user credentials to heirs ourselves. Only few keep a list of all accounts up to date, and password managers like KeePass are rarely used. The advice is therefore to only pass on important accounts, through which all other accounts can usually be recovered, e.g. via saved passwords in the browser or the password reset function. If each account has a unique password, there is no need to change it regularly. Answers to security questions and information on two-factor authentication should also be noted for each account.

Important accounts are:

- Password for the computer
- Passwords and recovery keys for encrypted hard disks (internal/external)
- Password, pin and/or swipe code for the mobile phone
- Mobile phone number, pin and puk for the SIM card
- Google, Apple and Microsoft account
- E-mail accounts
- Social media accounts
- Master password for the password manager and access to the file
- Other accounts with valuable records or memories

You should give the list to a person of trust while alive or deposited it in such a way that it can be found in the event of death. Paper is most durable—a form to print can be downloaded here: <https://www.memoryanddeath.com/my-digital-legacy/> A recurring reminder in the calendar helps to keep the list up to date. With a letter of attorney, the person you trust is also legally authorised to take care of your digital legacy.

Leave your wishes

Make a general note, or a note for each account, how the person you trust should deal with the data. In this way, your wishes can be respected and you support your descendants considerably. For example, you can consent to all data being viewed. Or you may give permission for photos to be viewed, social media profiles to be preserved, but you may instruct that WhatsApp messages should be deleted.

Portals for digital estate planning

Portals like memoresa organise digital data during lifetime and act according to the wishes of the deceased in the event of death. However, these portals also need care and should be integrated into everyday digital life. In the past, portals for digital estate planning often had a shorter lifespan than their users. It is to be hoped that more stable business models will offer greater reliability in the future.

What to do in case of death?

In the event of death, the bereaved should not hastily delete the data of their deceased and should also keep their mobile phone number. The email account can be crucial, for example, for restoring other accounts, the mobile phone number for securing WhatsApp records or for two-factor authentications. Heirs should take a few weeks after the death to think about which documents need to be saved, which memories they want to keep and what can be deleted or forgotten. However, you should not wait too long, as many accounts are automatically deleted if they are inactive. Digital data do not make us immortal, but with the right planning, digital legacies can hold a valuable potential for the mourning and remembrance of the bereaved.

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