

# IRMS Conference at the Celtic Manor Resort, Wales (19<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> May 2019)

The Celtic Manor Resort in Wales was the location for 2019's conference. The hotel's décor visually reflected its appellation with several large carved wooden dragons wrapped around ornamental pillars in the lobby and Celtic knots patterned wall-to-wall carpeting. The conference's Monday evening gala dinner enthusiastically embraced this motif with a medieval long tables setting for diners and Celtic goblets, shields and crowns rendered in plastic placed atop the tables at regular intervals to complete the gothic effect. At times across the two-and-a-half days' conference it looked like we'd walked in on a 'Game of Thrones' comic con fan meet-up.

The contextualising theme for this year's conference was 'Trust and Truth', two ideas very much in the ether in the era of 'fake news', 'alternative facts' and Cambridge Analytica and Facebook data scandals. We are living through a period of moral panic which coalesces around ever increasing digital expansion and innovation alongside a massive growth in data. Data ethics has become a vitally important issue, one that reacts to and actively engages with the current zeitgeist, both explicitly and implicitly. The illicit harvesting and manipulation of data for political purposes is just the 'hot topic' starting point. Data - its use, its susceptibility to misuse and its regulation – has become a thing, around which an overarching 'state of our age' discussion and analysis can be attached.

The precis of the opening address of the conference - 'The Quest for Truth and Trust' - was an introductory synopsis which the keynote speakers expanded upon over the two days: 'Content Governance in the Digital Workplace' analysed the seemingly opposing forces of the business need for digital flexibility and innovation against the regulatory pull of effective governance, with compliance and risk management. 'Archiving in the Public Interest Under GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018' was concerned with how the increasing regulatory forces that data is subject to was compatible with and even underpinned the archival priorities of public interest records management.

Tuesday morning's speakers approached the issue of data and the impact of new technology in a more existential way: Daragh O'Brien and Katherine O'Keefe are co-authors of the book 'Ethical Data in Information Management' and their fascinating talk looked at how data and digital technology has had a profound influence on society at large, from data used to reinforce social inequality up to its impact on disrupting the democratic process. The pair argued that the damaging effects of data and technology needed a moral compass through increased regulation and legislation. Adam Joinson's 'Help! A Robot Ate my Data (and Other Thoughts on the Future)' postulated on the future, from the dystopian prophecies of A.I and robot intelligence to how the use of technology is disruptive and has unintended consequences that both organisations and culture as a whole has to always play catch up with.

Following the keynote presentations on each day there were a variety of 'breakout sessions' for delegates to attend, grouped within a number of categories: Records Management Nuts & Bolts;

Law & Regulation; Soft Skills; Technology & Innovation; Deployment of Solutions. The sessions covered a wide range of topics with speakers from an eclectic span of public bodies, universities and companies as well as specialists and consultants. A lot of information was condensed within each session so it could be conveyed within the allotted 30 minutes. Attending a series of these 'breakouts' across the morning and afternoon timetables was quite an intense experience as there was so much information to absorb and process within such a tight timeframe.

The strength of the sessions lay in the expanse of titles and the subjects they covered, from the seemingly 'dry' to the decidedly leftfield and the knowledge and enthusiasm of the presentation speakers. A random pick across the two days illustrates how diverse and far-ranging they were: 'Improving Information Management Practice Through Culture Change', 'Would You Trust a Ferret with Your Records', 'Grenfell Tower Fire Public Inquiry: Information and Records Management in Action', "Little Chunks of my Life Missing": Memory, Identity and Subject Access to Social Care Records', 'Managing Records with Empathy – The Emotionally Intelligent Records Managers of Tomorrow', 'Unlocking the Value of Your Document with Artificial Intelligence', 'Regulatory Compliance and Records Management'.

Unsurprisingly, given their relevance and direct influence on current information and records management processes, procedures and ways of working SharePoint, RecordPoint, Office 365 and GDPR were recurring subjects of several presentations across the sessions.

Any remaining time delegates had to spare between keynote addresses and breakout sessions was taken browsing or perusing -depending on your inclination- the Information Market vendor stalls where businesses displayed their wares, keen to sell the strengths of what their companies had to offer your records management requirements or longer term archiving needs. The amount of sweets and pens freebies to entice the casually interested delegate could have easily filled several dozen archive boxes to the brim and leave more than enough left over to find a place in every conference attendee's suitcase or overnight bag as well.

This was my first ever attendance at the annual IRMS conference and I found it both enjoyable and stimulating. Gathering such a large number of people together united by their professional lives and careers left me feeling both energised and inspired. The conference helped to generate a sense of a community of people linked by a shared purpose - to extend or impart their knowledge, skills and experience - and with a common goal - to reach for and attain new standards in information and records management.

