

Legacy Planning

Legacy planning for your digital media is similar to making a will: many of us recognize that we should have a plan in place but we don't because it is difficult and, in some cases, uncomfortable. However, legacy planning for your digital items is important and can be a great help to your loved ones in case of emergency or death. Your business or organization may also lose access to documents that they need if you are unable to access your accounts. Alternately, you may want to ensure that some items are NOT available to others in the future—for example, you may not want personal letters that were kept for sentimental reasons to end up with family. You may also want your gmail or social media account to be shut down in the event of your death.

Since many of us are reluctant to pass over a big list of our accounts and passwords to anyone (even family) we may avoid making plans. Thankfully there are a number of ways to ensure that your items are protected and that your wishes are respected. Your plan should include emergency preparations but may also include sharing documents or photos regularly to key people to avoid loss. You will also need to consider that some things, like music and video downloads, may not be transferrable.

Below are a number of strategies for digital legacy planning. You may need to use multiple approaches, depending on the items you want to protect. Above all, no matter how you plan, make sure that you share your plan with family so that they don't spend unnecessary time trying to access items that do not exist.

Digital Legacy Strategies

1. Share Your Whole Computer – This can be accomplished by sharing your computer login password with someone you trust (perhaps someone who does not live in your city since they would have limited access anyway). Similarly, you can also give someone access by providing the computer login in a place where family or friends would look and have access to in case of emergency: a safe, safe-deposit box, paper file, etc. The challenge to all of these plans is that you should periodically change your password, which would require updating it anywhere it is kept as well.
2. Encrypt/password protect documents – Adding passwords to your computer files can work in two ways: first, you can protect things like correspondence or personal items that you do not want available to your “digital executor.” Doing so might allow you to give someone access to your computer login without fear that they will see some files. In this case, it helps to tell the person in question that any password protection is intentional and that you prefer those files be deleted in the event of your death. Second, you can keep a document on your desktop with all of your account logins, passwords, etc. This file can easily be updated since it lives right on your desktop, but it can only be accessed with the password. Consider giving the password to a key person in your digital legacy plan.



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3. Create shared folders on cloud storage like Skydrive and Dropbox – These folders can be viewed by multiple people, as needed. Anything that others may want (especially non-sensitive materials like photos) can easily be shared widely to avoid loss.
4. Create shared or open albums on sites like Google Photo or Flickr – Flickr photos can be set as public with downloading available, making them truly open and accessible. If that's too much and you prefer not to have photos on the open web, consider using Google Photos with private links. Google albums are technically open and available but only to people who have the link provided by you. Family can even bookmark the link, making it possible to access items without a password or account.
5. Share low importance account logins– Consider making a list of all of your “low importance” accounts and their login information and sharing it with a specific person, or tell a friend where it is kept.
6. Choose emails based on legacy planning availability – If you want to avoid family or estate executors attempting access to your email, choose an account like Yahoo that prevents any such access. To create special rules for your email after death, consider gmail since it has the most options. If you check your current email system and don't like their policy on email access after death, switch accounts.
7. Plan for your social media accounts – Make a list of the social media you use, and close any accounts you no longer want. Make legacy plans including directions for whether accounts should be left up or taken down after your death (some platforms will decide for you).
8. Use a digital legacy planning service – Look at Digital Beyond's service list to find companies that email certain friends and family if you don't respond to their periodic checkins.
9. List accounts without giving access – If you are concerned with providing account numbers and logins (and that is a valid concern) consider giving key individuals a list of your accounts and providers without numbers or logins. If you pass away, they should be able to gain access to pertinent accounts if they are legally allowed. Your list will give them the basic information so they don't have to guess or search for accounts.
10. Provide family with a list of accounts that you prefer they not attempt to access.

