

Standardization of the Marital Status Data Element

1. The marital status of an individual is sometime held in electronic records, e.g. in personnel records. Subject to business requirements and within legal bounds, information about a person's marital status may need to be shared between government Bureaux and Departments (B/Ds). This paper analyses the issues related to such data exchange.
2. Information about a person's marital status is usually reported by the data subject based on a list of choice options provided by the information requester. Different information requesters may provide a different set of choice options, e.g.
 - (a) Single, Married, Separated, Divorced, Widowed (*as used in the Immigration Department's "Visa/Entry Permit Application Form": form ID(E)936A, as well as the Home Affairs Bureau's "Curriculum Vitae Form of Individual (Private and Confidential)"*);
 - (b) Never married, Married, Separated, Widowed (*as used in the Department of Health's "HIV/AIDS Report Form": form DH 2293*);
 - (c) Never married, Co-habited, Married, Separated, Divorced, Widowed (*as used in some forms prepared by the Social Welfare Department*);
 - (d) Single 單身, Married 已婚 (*as used in the Department of Health's form regarding "Information on Organ Removal for Donation"*).
3. Therefore, the meaning of the marital status reported by the data subject depends on the set of options provided by the data requester. For example, 'Separated' in scenarios 2(a) and 2(b) may represent different status.
4. Currently, before information is exchanged between two parties, the sender tells the receiver what choices are allowed for the marital status data element, and the receiver decides whether he needs to convert or further process the information received.
5. To facilitate data exchange in the future, we propose B/Ds to standardize the choices it provides in respect of the marital status data element. As 2(a) is the set of options more commonly used by B/Ds and all the statuses listed in 2(a) can be proved in a legal sense, we propose to use 2(a) as the

standardized list of choices, with ‘Single’ written/interpreted as ‘Single (Never Married)’.

6. For B/Ds that need to maintain more detail information regarding a person’s marital status beyond the legal sense (for example, whether the data subject is co-habited and heterosexual, or co-habited and homosexual), B/Ds may either convert such information before sending them to another B/D, or agree with the receiving party on the special marital statuses acceptable in the data exchange.
7. It is observed that information about a person’s marital status is only captured and used as a criterion for consideration when necessary, one of the reasons is that equal opportunity should be given to individuals regardless of their marital status. For example, a person’s marital status is not captured in the “Application Form for Employment with the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region”: form G.F. 340.

Information Technology Services Department
January 2004