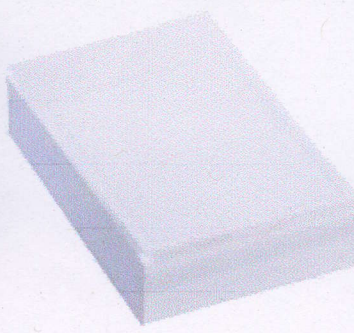


## Dancing with Darwin: The vanishing index card is a useful species still



the concept of cataloging, or book.



Just about everyone's heard of—and has probably used—3 x 5 cards, but where did they come from? Surprisingly, their origin dates back a thousand years. Also known as index cards, their evolution is rooted in indexing, key words in a

The monks of medieval times employed a hands-on system for marking a manuscript's key words: they would use a symbol that indicated a finger pointing to the term—that digit being the forefinger, or index finger. *Index* traces its roots to Latin and the concept of informer, or pointer. Its Greek forbear means to show.

Eventually these pointy fingers found their way to the back of the book in the form of an index of terms.

But how were books themselves being catalogued? In fits and starts, it seems, with the Alexandria Library using an alphabetical system in the third century B.C. E., but the European libraries using a peculiar rhyming system 11 centuries later.

Things got better organized in the nineteenth century, and in 1820 the first card catalog appeared in a library in London.

The American hero of the library index card was Melvil Dewey. He introduced his decimal classification system in the 1870s, in the library at Amherst College in western Massachusetts. The card he devised for his catalog drawers was approximately 3" x 5". The typewriter had been invented a few years earlier, and ultimately the card and the keys met and married.

The Library of Congress started printing its catalog index cards in 1901. For the next eight decades or so, the library index card and its attendant cabinets would serve as the Google of their day. Nicholson Baker, in his elegiac essay on card catalogs that appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1994, reported that the New York Public Library harbored 10 million cards.

With all these cards in libraries, perhaps it was only a matter of time before they segued into general use. Thrifty librarians primed the pump by setting out discarded cards for patrons to use for notes. Seeing the cards' usefulness, stationers began offering blank cards for sale. Business and professional people, writers and students adopted the cards as standard tools for researching, filing and organizing information.





And then, of course, computers struck. Card cabinets in libraries were dismantled and the cards discarded. There simply wasn't enough room anymore to capture all our knowledge on a 3" x 5" descendant of papyrus. The once ubiquitous little cards, whose origins are so closely linked to cataloging knowledge, teetered on the brink of extinction.

But not quite.

The index card is still a handy palimpsest, the screen on which one can quickly capture first ideas, reminder notes, titles of books friends recommend, your grandmother's recipe for pumpkin pie. Index cards, with their scratch-outs, imperfect erasures and caret insertions, jog our memory as only the tactile can.

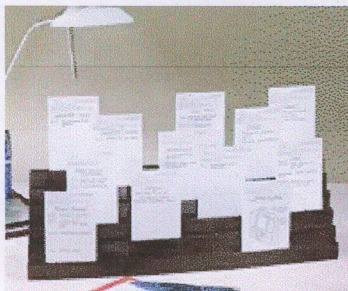
By contrast, electronic systems live a perilously finite existence. Better operating systems, application software and search engines will come along and the current hero will be banished, forgotten, trashed.

Get your digit out, the English are fond of saying—meaning, get cracking. Get your digit out—and your pen—and jot a note on an index card. It still has a place in the digital world.

How to thrive with the power of 3 x 5

They have been around for a century, they're as low-tech as they come, but 3 x 5 cards can fill an exalted role among twenty-first-century thinkers. Within the realm of capturing ideas and acting on them, they fill a niche that notebooks and electronics can't. What could be...

- simpler to use
- easier to shuffle around
- handier to keep and pull from a pocket
- more disposable—or lasting—than a simple index card?



The power of 24/7

At Levenger, we first saw 3 x 5 cards as a larger and more functional business card. Stand them vertically so that they're 5 x 3, and you can write a note right on your business card.

Gradually, we've realized that their power goes beyond this. Three-by-fives are the stuff of 24/7 ideas, better than back-of-the-envelope yet engendering that same freewheeling kind of thinking that often leads to the Great Idea.

And they're not only for taking notes on the run. They're for anywhere and any way you capture, develop and organize ideas. That's why, in addition to our Pocket Briefcases for

#### 3 x 5 tips from Steve

"A key tip: try to limit what you write on cards to a single topic or subject, such as a grocery list on one card, a hardware list on another. For work, keep cards for different people or areas of responsibility."

"I use a very fine-point pen to get lots of information on one card and I write neatly—most of the time."

"I almost never write on the backs, and this saves me from always having to turn cards around to see if there is writing on the back. Occasionally, when I'm taking a bunch of notes on one topic, like during a speech, then I'll write on the backs. But I number each card side, 1, 2, 3, which is my cue to look at the backs."

Steve also uses them to make daily lists of to-dos that he adds to and crosses off as he goes through the day.



travel, you'll now find your 3 x 5's close to home.

**The 3 x 5 in a wi-fi world**

Have you, like Steve, found a way to fit 3 x 5 into your repertoire of laptops, BlackBerries and iPods? Drop us an e-note at [cservice@levenger.com](mailto:cservice@levenger.com) and let us know how you use both a high-tech tool and the versatile low-tech power of 3 x 5.