Redaction of Sensitive Information

News reports of redaction errors continue to surface. In 2005, the Department of Defense unsuccessfully attempted to redact information from a report posted on their web site. More recently, sensitive information in documents from General Electric Company was uncovered because of inadequate redaction techniques.

In the paper world, a common approach to redaction is to use a black marker and black out the sensitive information. In the electronic world, the existence of metadata in the document requires more sophisticated — although not necessarily more difficult — techniques. Users might be tempted to use the highlighter function in Adobe to create a black box over the data to be redacted. While the "redacted" information is unreadable, the metadata is still imbedded in the document. Anyone can copy the black box, paste it into a word-processing document, and the information under the black box will appear. Users also might be tempted to set the font color for the redactable information to white. Again, the words in the document are not readable, but a savvy user can highlight the blank-looking area, change the text color, and read the "redacted" information.

Fortunately, there are effective means of eliminating this metadata from electronic documents. The simplest and very effective method is to omit the information from the original document before printing the document to PDF. For example, a Social Security number can be included as XXX-XX-1234. If redaction must be made in the PDF document, the Touch Up Text tool can be used to amend, replace, or delete words. Saved as a new PDF, the old words are no longer visible. Commercial software also is available for true redaction purposes.