US Federal Government Agency Becomes Compliant With NARA While Reducing Costs of Fulfilling FOIA Requests

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NEOSTEK
Innovating IT

INDUSTRY: Government
USE CASE: Records Management

Introduction

For US federal government agencies, records and information management (RIM) is an integral part of everyday work. They must comply with memorandums and directives for record classification and retention; this is in part to enable them to respond to the constant stream of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests that many Federal agencies receive. The US government received over 788,000 FOIA requests in 2016.[1] When an FOIA request is received, the organization must be able to produce all records pertaining to the issue in question. Many of these are email records.

All government agencies have been challenged in the governance of email records since the issuance of the Managing Government Records Directive, M-12-18 (dated August 24, 2012) addressing the heads of all executive departments, agencies, and independent agencies. The overarching message of the directive references the 2012 Presidential Memorandum, "Managing Government Records,"[2] which defined the government's objective of "Improving records management [to] improve performance and promote openness and accountability by better documenting agency actions and decisions."

One component of M-12-18 is the section entitled "Part II. Section A: Require Electronic Recordkeeping to Ensure Transparency, Efficiency, and Accountability" which specifically addressed the automated management of email in section A 3.1:

A 3.1 NARA, the Federal Chief Information Officers Council and the Federal Records Council will work with private industry and other stakeholders to produce economically viable automated records management solutions. By December 31, 2013, NARA will produce a comprehensive plan in collaboration with its stakeholders to describe suitable approaches for the automated management of email, social media, and other types of digital record content, including advanced search techniques. The plan will detail expected outcomes and outline potential associated risks.

Subsequently, in September 2014, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) addressed the many requirements of M-12-18, including the need for "a comprehensive plan in collaboration with its stakeholders to describe suitable approaches for the automated management of emails…"[3] as well as recommendations for the approach to be taken by agencies.

This represents a significant step forward in RIM practices for many US federal agencies today, where the practice in many departments is to print emails and then store them as paper records. While reliable, this method is slow and cumbersome and consumes numerous person-hours at significant expense.

SUMMARY

CHALLENGE

- Storing email in records in Outlook PST files was error-prone and inefficient when responding to FOIA requests.

- Needed to comply with all federal guidelines, including Presidential Memoranda, US Code, Federal Records Act and other Agency specific guidance.

SOLUTION

- Enabled much faster search by storing all records (email and other file types) in SharePoint and tagging each record with rich metadata.

- Simplified record capture by integrating SharePoint folder access directly into the Outlook application.

RESULTS

- Reduced time to respond to complex FOIA requests from 160 hours to 1 hour—a savings of almost $24,000 per request.

- Achieved 100% user adoption of the new process.

- Became compliant with Federal RIM Program Maturity Model and the Universal Electronic Records Management Requirements.

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Challenge

For the Agency, RIM practices to ensure compliance with M-12-18 and the ability to respond to FOIA requests involved complicated processes which were a burden on individual employees. Employees were tasked to set up specific folders in their archive inboxes in which they stored records—embedded in Outlook PST files. This approach made responding to FOIA requests problematic and error prone for a number of reasons:

Time-consuming manual processes. When complying with FOIA requests, it was a manual process at the employee level to search and respond. In addition, it was not uncommon for more complex requests to impact multiple employees. A complex request could include an electronic search of various share drives, personal drives and email, as well as searching paper files in desks, file cabinets around the office, and file rooms. The requests usually had a short turnaround time and almost always interrupted employees' regular work.

Findability issues when people were out of office. When employees went on planned or unplanned absences, took vacations, were away due to illness, or were terminated, it was difficult for those still at work to track down the PST files needed to complete a request. This increased the time needed to respond.

"Deploying the Colligo solution at our client site across all business units was about the easiest development task of all of the services we provide. The out-of-the box installation, ease of integrating into government systems, and minimal training requirements made this one of the fastest deliverable solutions that NEOSTEK offers our customers."

Amina Elgouacem, CEO, NEOSTEK

"Colligo was the missing link in providing our client with an end-to-end electronic records and information management solution. With it, we delivered! Colligo solves the problem of classifying and properly managing case-based emails while increasing user adoption. My client was extremely happy with the solution because it got the job done and was easily adopted by the end users."

Amina Elgouacem, CEO, NEOSTEK

A lack of email metadata. By maintaining emails in PST files, no additional metadata was captured that could have been used to facilitate searches. As a result, sophisticated searches of anything beyond plain keyword searches of the subject line, sender, or recipient were impossible. It was a time-consuming and subjective exercise to review each keyword search result and decide if it had anything to do with the FOIA request. This increased the risk that not all the pertinent records could be found.

Scattered information. By using PST files as the archiving file format, information ended up scattered across drives and embedded within multiple PST files. This only increased the complexity of searching, and increased the risk that individual files would become corrupted and the records within them lost.

Lack of public trust. There have been multiple recent news reports covering FOIA request responses from government departments and agencies, revealing that other searches have found records that were not previously provided. This undermines the public's trust in government and was an embarrassment to senior management, who could not be confident that their manual processes were adequate.

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Solution

To address the requirements of M-12-18, NEOSTEK identified and implemented an end-to-end records management solution at the Agency which completely addressed the automation of emails as a record. The core enabling technology was Colligo Email Manager, an Outlook plug-in which seamlessly integrated SharePoint with Outlook within the native Outlook interface.

Simplified record capture. Capturing records was made significantly simpler. Using Email Manager, employees simply drag and drop emails that qualify as records into a shared SharePoint folder. This same process can be used for non-email files dragged into the Outlook navigation pane. The system automatically captures some metadata, and prompts for more—including content types to determine retention schedule.

Radically improved search capabilities. Critically, searching for records to fulfill FOIA requests was made much faster and more robust, with less chance that something will be overlooked. Information is now centralized and structured in SharePoint, meaning that a single search is all that is needed to identify appropriate records.

Deployed quickly. The underlying records management processes did not need to change, and no extensive training was required. In fact, the project team asked the first tranche of end users to present to upper management to demonstrate how easy it was.

"Demonstrating Colligo to our customers was one of the easiest solutions we have employed in our business. Due to the "Managing Government Records Directive," our customer understands the critical need they have. Colligo is a tool that clearly solves that needs with the added value of integrating with the familiar MS Outlook."

Amina Elgouacem, CEO, NEOSTEK

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Results

Since implementing the new solution, the Agency has dramatically reduced the time needed to respond to FOIA requests, as well as the associated cost of inefficiency. Moreover, the Agency improved its records management practices in line with the federal maturity model, boosted compliance, realized 100% user adoption, and improved collaboration amongst employees.

Time and cost savings. Whereas complex FOIA requests could previously involve 40 or more employees each devoting 3-5 hours to complete a search, this search can be performed by a single person in under an hour. At a rate of $150/hour for four hours per employee, this represents a $23,850 savings for each complex request. Each year, the Agency receives over 175 complex requests, representing a savings of over $4 million per year. With NEOSTEK's know-how and the inclusion of Colligo as a key component of a fully automated FOIA search—keeping email searchable and accessible with metadata and no burden to end users—they've enabled the Agency to go from multiple people working for hours on FOIA requests to a single person for one hour.

Superior records management practices. The deployment of Colligo Email Manager has facilitated the introduction of several records management best practices. There is no duplication of email records, as the system flags emails that have already been saved by another user. Records are tagged with rich metadata enabling greater search. Retention schedules are automated based on records classification at the instant they are captured by the user.

NARA maturity model gains. NEOSTEK was able to demonstrate to the customer how the implementation of the proper tool—Colligo Email Manager—would ensure that the Agency was meeting the success criteria defined by the Federal RIM Program Maturity Model[4] which is the government-wide analytical tool designed by NARA to evaluate the effectiveness of and agencies' records management program. With Colligo Email Manager as a part of the solution set—meeting the requirements of a compliant records management program as defined by NARA's Records Management Maturity Model—NEOSTEK has supported the Agency in their pursuit of the highest level of maturity (Level 4—"Embedded"), attained by embedding and integrating the email solution within the Agency.

Completing a complex FOIA request

🟧 Pre-implementation   🟦 Post-implementation

Total employee time needed to complete search

🟧 160 hours+	
🟦 1 hour	

Numbers of employees required to complete search

🟧 40 employees	
🟦 1 employee	

Improved compliance. Agency employees can now be sure that they are compliant with all applicable memorandums and directives and have higher confidence when testifying in congress that all requested records have been identified. Prompt, thorough response to FOIA requests will continue to increase people's trust of their government over time.

100% user adoption. The solution uses the native Outlook interface that people were familiar with to begin with. SharePoint views show up directly within the Outlook folder meaning no new process steps were required for record capture or search.

Improved collaboration. For collaboration purposes, users are now able to search for and find email records in SharePoint, right from within the Outlook interface. This has enabled greater information sharing within the department, and less siloed information.

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Colligo is a leading provider of collaborative apps for the digital workplace, extending Microsoft SharePoint, Office 365, and OneDrive for Business. The company's award-winning, unified suite is used by organizations every day for email records management, document distribution, and mobile collaboration. Colligo is a Microsoft Gold Application Development Partner and Microsoft Silver Cloud Platform Partner, with Global 500 customers including four of the top five global oil and gas companies, and serving multiple government agencies including the US Department of Energy.

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NEOSTEK, Inc. is an Information Technology services company founded in January 2010 by experienced IT professionals. The company's driving principle remains simple: build a company focused solely on solving our customers' information and technology challenges within their mission-critical business processes. Today, NEOSTEK works with US Government clients, helping them with IT strategy, architecture, governance, information management, and application development. Customers include the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Justice, the Department of State, and the Library of Congress. NEOSTEK has achieved numerous awards which include first place in InfoGov's "2017 Information Governance Service Provider" and Inc. 5000 Fastest Growing Business in 2016 and 2017.

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[1] FOIA.gov www.foia.gov/index.html. Accessed Sep. 22, 2017.

[2] "Presidential Memorandum—Managing Government Records." National Archives and Records Administration, National Archives and Records Administration, obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/28/presidential-memorandum-managing-government-records. Accessed 23 Aug. 2017.

[3] "Automated Electronic Records Management Report/Plan." Records Managers - Automated Electronic Records Management Plan, National Archives and Records Administration, 19 Sept. 2014, www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/prmd/A31report-9-19-14.pdf. Accessed 23 Aug. 2017.

[4] Federal RIM Program Maturity Model User's Guide www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/prmd/maturity-model-user-guide.pdf Accessed Sep. 22, 2017.

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