

Transforming Records Management to Build the Digital Archives of Tomorrow

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Summary

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) has increased its efforts to modernize recordkeeping practices across the U.S. government with the goal of making fully electronic government -- and eventually a fully digital archives -- a reality. By working closely with the Administration, NARA has been successful in issuing two critical policy memorandums, which are also closely linked to NARA's current strategic plan (2018-2022) -- all of which contain requirements for agencies to meet in support of a fully electronic government.

The first memorandum issued in 2012 required all email and permanent electronic records be managed electronically (OMB/NARA M-12-18). Federal agencies have been successful meeting these goals, thanks in part to NARA's Capstone approach for managing email.

In 2018, NARA released its five-year strategic plan which requires NARA to issue policies and create processes to support the transition to fully electronic government. As part of this strategic plan, NARA has decided to no longer accept paper or other analog records after December 2022. This goal is the clearest statement NARA has made about its commitment to going digital. It also requires agencies to transform their processes and practices to ensure permanent records are either born-digital or digitized prior to transfer.

In July 2019, NARA reached another significant milestone on the path to digital government with the release of the second critical policy memorandum titled Transition to Electronic Records (OMB/NARA M-19-21). This new memorandum replaces the previous 2012 memorandum and incorporates the goals established in NARA's strategic plan. As a result, federal agencies are now required to manage all records in electronic formats with the appropriate metadata.

These goals are aggressive and not without challenges. There are certainly concerns about resources, skill gaps of employees working with electronic records, and support from senior managers in agencies to ensure the goals are met. However, we believe this is what our customers and the public want, while at the same time improving efficiency and effectiveness within agencies. There is much to do, but the goal is within reach.

Biography

As the Chief Records Officer, Mr. Brewer leads records management throughout the Federal Government with an emphasis on electronic records. He provides overall direction and guidance for Federal agencies on

all aspects of records and information management. This includes overseeing the scheduling and appraisal of Federal records, the development and delivery of records management training, the issuance of records management regulations and guidance, and evaluating the effectiveness of records management programs in Federal agencies.

Prior to his current appointment in May 2016, Mr. Brewer held a number of positions in NARA's records management program, including management positions working directly with Federal agencies to improve records management government-wide. Most recently, he directed the National Records Management Program, coordinating the activities of headquarters and field records management staff in support of NARA's overall strategic plan.

Prior to joining NARA in 1999, Mr. Brewer was a records management consultant responsible for managing records management programs at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Virginia Department of Transportation. He has more than 25 years of experience in records and information management and earned his Certified Records Manager (CRM) designation in 1998. Mr. Brewer is also a senior fellow of the Partnership for Public Service's Excellence in Government Program, which focuses on developing the leadership skills of senior government employees. He holds an M.A. in Political Science from the University of Georgia, and a B.A. in Government from the College of William and Mary.

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NB: These speaking notes do not constitute the complete oral presentation given at the EASTICA conference.

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Through the goals and directives established by NARA and the Administration, NARA is transforming records management across the U.S. government to make it more modern, efficient, and effective in its decision-making and service to customers. These goals and directives require agencies to transition to electronic recordkeeping, which is a necessary first step to creating the digital archives of tomorrow.

As we discuss the goals and policy requirements, we will also discuss the benefits of a fully electronic government, along with the obstacles to success and potential strategies for overcoming them.

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NARA is a federal agency. We are the Nation's record keeper and historical archive. Of all documents and materials created in the course of business conducted by the United States Federal government, only 1%-3% are so important for legal or historical reasons that they are kept by us forever.

I am the Chief Records Officer for the U.S. Government. My office consists of approximately 100 people, divided into 4 programs: training, oversight, policy, and operations. Operations, our largest program by far, does the appraisal and scheduling work for the federal government as well as offers assistance to agencies on records management activities.

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At the agency level, the vision is about engagement and discovery – but also about living in a digital world. The vision of my Office is also connected to the digital world, but is even more specific.

We are technology focused. We see records as integral to each agency's mission. We promote the effective governance of information assets. We think records and information should be managed electronically with minimal end-user intervention, freeing staff to focus on mission. We see the work of our office as shaping the archives of tomorrow. On a daily basis we work directly with about 270 federal agencies on activities such as scheduling and appraisal; policy development; records management training; and reporting and agency inspections.

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Before we get to the new memo, let's take a look back at some of the key policies that have been issued since 2011.

In August 2012, NARA and the Administration's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) pushed us

forward on the path to fully electronic government with the issuance of the Managing Government Records Directive (M-12-18). Our goal was to establish targets for the modernization of recordkeeping, promote electronic records management, and eliminate agency 'print and file' practices.

In 2018, NARA released its five year strategic plan that stated our intent to issue policy and regulations to support the transition to fully electronic government. Also, more significantly, NARA declared that after December 2022, it would no longer accept paper records into the archives and would also no longer accept transfers of paper into its records centers.

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More recently, in 2018, the Administration's Government Reform Plan reflected NARA's strategic vision of fully electronic government, including the December 2022 goal of no longer accepting paper. This is significant – it broadens the impact of NARA's strategic goal to a cross-government initiative.

In July 2019, OMB and NARA released Transition to Electronic Records, M-19-21, which supersedes the Managing Government Records Directive of 2012. It includes the bold goals of no longer accepting paper and also calls for agencies to close agency-operated records centers that store paper records.

This new Directive raises the bar for agencies who now must adjust their processes and policies to focus on fully-electronic records management.

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The new memo, M-19-21, has seven broad and aggressive targets for NARA and federal agencies to meet between 2019 and 2022.

The one goal for 2019 is a carry-over from the previous memorandum that requires agencies to manage all their permanent electronic records electronically, or in other words, ensure that these important records are managed electronically and not 'printed and filed'.

Other goals in the new memo include requirements for NARA to issue new regulations and guidance to support electronic records management (ERM).

Also NARA will work with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to integrate ERM into position description standards for agency employees working in records management.

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Other targets established in the new memorandum for 2022 include requirements to manage all permanent records electronically, and not just those born-digital. The memorandum also requires agencies to explore the electronic management of temporary (disposable) records, or if that is not practical or feasible, store them in commercial storage facilities.

NARA has been meeting with agencies since the issuance of the memo in July to identify areas where further clarification or guidance is needed. NARA has agreed to develop and issue supplemental clarifying guidance to agencies.

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Let us now discuss why these policies and requirements are so important to making this transformation to fully electronic government. In short, it requires us to rethink how we work and what we focus on. This is what I believe our customers expect from us, and frankly, is something we need to do at NARA to maintain

our relevance as a national archives.

We can no longer overextend ourselves by supporting dual processes for analog and electronic records. We need to focus our resources and attention on making the transition to electronic. Towards that goal, we have set a clear marker for change, which is often necessary if we are to see the change happen. In doing so, it forces us to explore and innovate in really important areas such as the development of sophisticated tools and technologies that take automation to another level.

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There are a couple of other general categories where this transition to ERM has clear benefits. Internally within agencies, we will see greater efficiency and effectiveness with improved access to records and information to support decision-making. We will also see improved integration of RM requirements into business applications and more streamlined and automated workflows that will allow us to work more efficiently.

Externally, fully-electronic government is what our customers, the public, expect from their Government. Citizens expect to interact with us electronically, so our systems must be designed that way and must include the necessary ERM requirements. We are always working to improve our openness and transparency and ERM is an important tool for realizing that goal.

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Balanced against the benefits, we do need to be realistic about the challenges we are facing as we proceed with the transition.

First on the list is resources. In most agencies there are funding constraints and limited staff to ensure the success of these important initiatives. There is also an enormous volume of paper and analog records that still need to be managed, which is drawing resources away from focusing on electronic.

We also need to address the steep learning curve for employees working in records management that need to quickly learn about electronic records management to properly advise leadership and implement innovative initiatives.

For all this challenging work to be successful, agencies must have a champion in senior management that promote the work, garner support, and obtain needed resources.

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There are no easy answers or solutions to the challenges. In many cases the right approach depends upon records and information professionals in agencies making connections with other related disciplines in their agencies to form coalitions and establish partnerships oriented towards improving information management in the agency.

We believe it's important that agencies establish an information governance framework that promotes inter-disciplinary collaboration and ensures that records management is integrated into the agency's strategic approach to managing information.