Inside One DHS Office's Journey to Electronic Records Management

The Office of Intelligence and Analysis has a mix of short-term and long-term goals to achieve electronic records readiness.

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Transitioning from paper record-keeping to electronic is a key component across federal IT modernization strategies, but aligning the budget to the effort has been a challenging hurdle.

Although electronic records management provides countless benefits and efficiencies, IT departments sometimes struggle to get the funding, said DHS IT Program Manager Jon Anders at a recent FCW Electronic Records Readiness event.
Anders, who works in the Office of Intelligence and Analysis office at DHS, said electronic records management can help his office comply with Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, Congressional requests for information and basic IT functioning to support intelligence community missions.

“At [my office], you can imagine any intelligence organization within the intelligence community really has competing goals and requirements,” Anders said at the event. “Just amongst the intelligence team, everyone is competing for the limited number of dollars we have.”

Unfortunately, IT departments often get the budget leftovers.

“Mission requirements are always going to beat out records management (for funding dollars),” he said.

To prove electronic records management’s worth, Anders is focused on detailing the benefits of electronic records management.

“Whenever you make an investment in a new technology, you want to know what the return on investment is,” he said. “A lot of the work of our staff is tied up in is administrative work instead of the mission.”

According to Anders, it’s easy to draw a straight line between electronic records management and dramatically improved efficiencies and mission performance.

“The record management piece will provide for better IT searches — I can't tell you how much time we spend having high-up officials searching for information pieces,” he said. “Also speaking to our privacy and FOIA teams, one of the things we found is that there are weeks and weeks where GS-14 and 15s are searching and searching for record requests. If we don't respond to these requests in a timely manner, there are legal fees we are responsible for paying.”

In outlining the return on investment potential, Anders showed how the agency can save weeks of time on FOIA requests and Congressional inquiries by digitizing its records.
Anders said his office has a mix of short-term and long-term goals for electronic management, including targeted workforce training, an annual internal audit review process, and ultimately deploying an electronic records management system that meets all of the National Archives and Records Administration's “must-have” and “should-have” requirements.

“There are 73 lifecycle requirements for everybody's program to achieve, 56 must-haves to be NARA-compliant and 17 should-haves. When [my office] looked at those requirements, we felt that the should-haves are just as important as the must-haves,” he said. “Our vision is to become a records management leader within DHS and really foster collaboration with our internal and external partners, promoting continuous improvement, innovative tools and technology.”

The office is on track to deploy electronic records management by the third quarter of 2021. Anders expects artificial intelligence to play a vital role in electronic records management.

“In 2022, our CTO is looking to deploy Microsoft and Azure clouds in our secret and top secret environments,” he said. “In 2022 or 2023, I will be looking with our cross domain service program manager across secret and top secret networks.”