How to Ease the Transition to Digital Records Management

Without a doubt, agencies need to accelerate their transition to digital records management. Data is often described as the lifeblood of government operations, and to take full advantage of the data stored in their massive volumes of records, agencies need to manage those records digitally.

In most agencies, a large percentage of available data is considered "dark," that is, data that goes unused, often because it's not being properly managed. However, in some cases, that data is not being used because it's no longer needed for daily operations, yet it still takes up space on agencies' primary storage systems.

Either way, with the volume of digital records on the rise, agencies need to make the shift to develop a comprehensive, agile and secure approach to digital records management.

That was the focus of a recent GovLoop virtual event titled Transforming Digital Records Management: From Creation to Archive, featuring three industry thought leaders:

- **Richard Breakiron**, Senior Director for Strategic Initiatives, Commvault
- **Ryan Lake**, Chief Technology Officer, KELYN Technologies
- **David Rubal**, CISSP, Head of U.S. Federal Business Development, AWS Storage Services, AWS Worldwide Public Sector

Here are highlights from their discussion.

Align Records Strategy With Operational Needs

Agencies have no shortage of records management policy and guidance from the National Archives and Records Administration, the National Institute of Standards and Technology, and so on. The challenge is figuring out how all of that applies to an agency's specific mission requirements, said Breakiron.

"For example, a health record used by a medical facility is totally different from a parts supply record created by a [defense] logistics group," he said.

One tool that can help is a metatag. When creating a record, you encode information about when the record was created, by whom and for what purposes. The records management system will use that tag to determine what policies apply, such as how long the record should be retained and how easily accessible it should be.

Bridge the Records-IT Divide

One of the challenges of managing digital records is more cultural than technical, said Lake. Traditionally, records management experts have focused more on policy, and IT staff more on infrastructure.

But with the shift to digital records, records experts need to understand the implications of the technology that implements records policies, e.g., how records are protected. And the IT staff need to understand the policies they're enabling, e.g., how long records must be retained.

While working on an ongoing digital records project at an intelligence agency, Commvault, KELYN and AWS have made a point to bridge this gap, Lake said.

"This is one of the focuses that we at KELYN have really brought to this project," he said. "We've actively searched out individuals [on our staff] who can speak the IT to the IT people, and the records management to the records management people."
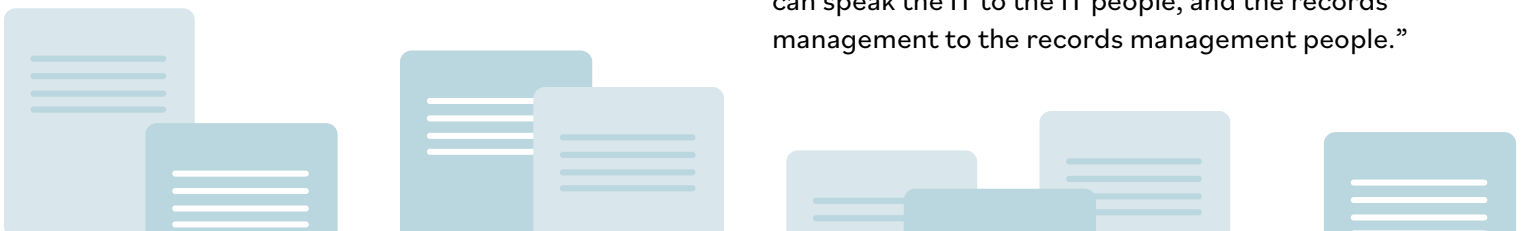
Give More Thought to Future Use

The cost of storing digital records depends greatly on how often and how quickly people might need to access those records.

For example, some records must be retained for a specific length of time to comply with existing laws or regulations. Quick access is not a consideration, so they can be maintained in the most cost-effective way, said Rubal.

In contrast, cyber-related data needs to be readily available for future analysis over a long period of time, perhaps using machine learning to get new insights, he said.

"It's about establishing the retention policy, and managing the data lifecycle through to retention," Rubal said, "backing it up and making sure that that data's accessible and is managed at the right level, in the right tier of storage."

Give More Thought to Accessibility

Ensuring that records are accessible to people with a disability is not just a matter of compliance.

Yes, federal agencies must ensure that all content or applications comply with the standards required by the Revised Section 508 Standards of the Rehabilitation Act. But agencies need to take it a step further, Breakiron said. Beyond simply accessing those records, agencies need to make sure employees can do the analytics as well.

It's a fundamental question of agency performance, he said. "Is everybody in the organization getting the data they need to execute their mission area?" Breakiron said.

One way to do facilitate that is with a combination of metatagging and role-based access. Many records management and analytic tools come with accessibility features, such as for translating text into audio or converting audio into text. You can tag data so that the appropriate accessibility features are triggered when a given user opens a record.

To learn more about digital records management, watch the full session on demand.