



Highlights of [GAO-08-742](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal agencies are increasingly using electronic mail (e-mail) for essential communication. In doing so, they are potentially creating messages that have the status of federal records, which must be managed and preserved in accordance with the Federal Records Act. Under the act, both the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and federal agencies have responsibilities for managing federal records, including e-mail records.

In view of the importance that e-mail plays in documenting government activities, GAO was asked, among other things, to review the extent to which NARA provides oversight of federal records management, describe selected agencies' processes for managing e-mail records, and assess these agencies' e-mail policies and key practices. To do so, GAO examined NARA guidance, regulations, and oversight activities, as well as e-mail policies at four agencies (of contrasting sizes and structures) and the practices of selected officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that NARA develop and implement a comprehensive oversight mechanism and that the four agencies address weaknesses in records management oversight, policies, and practices. Officials from the five agencies indicated, in comments on a draft of this report, that they were implementing or intended to implement GAO's recommendations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-742](#). For more information, contact Linda Koontz at (202) 512-6240 or koontzl@gao.gov.

FEDERAL RECORDS

National Archives and Selected Agencies Need to Strengthen E-Mail Management

What GAO Found

Although NARA has responsibilities for oversight of agencies' records and records management programs and practices, including conducting inspections or surveys, performing studies, and reporting results to the Congress and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), in recent years NARA's oversight activities have been primarily limited to performing studies. NARA has conducted no inspections of agency records management programs since 2000, because it uses inspections only to address cases of the highest risk, and no recent cases have met its criteria. In addition, NARA has not consistently reported details on records management problems or recommended practices that were discovered as a result of its studies. Without more comprehensive evaluations of agency records management, NARA has limited assurance that agencies are appropriately managing the records in their custody and that important records are not lost.

The four agencies reviewed generally managed e-mail records through paper-based processes, rather than using electronic recordkeeping. A transition to electronic recordkeeping was under way at one of the four agencies, and two had long-term plans to use electronic recordkeeping. (The fourth agency had no current plans to make such a transition.) Each of the business units that GAO reviewed (one at each agency) maintained "case" files to fulfill its mission and used these for recordkeeping. The practice at the units was to include e-mail printouts in the case files if the e-mail contained information necessary to document the case—that is, record material. These printouts included transmission data and distribution lists, as required.

All four agencies had e-mail records management policies that addressed, with a few exceptions, the requirements in NARA's regulations. However, the practices of senior officials at those agencies did not always conform to requirements. Of the 15 senior officials whose practices were reviewed, the e-mail records for 7 (including all 4 at one agency) were managed in compliance with requirements. (One additional official was selected for review but did not use e-mail.) The other 8 officials generally kept e-mail messages, record or nonrecord, in e-mail systems that were not recordkeeping systems. (Among other things, recordkeeping systems allow related records to be categorized according to their business purposes.) If e-mail records are not kept in recordkeeping systems, they may be harder to find and use, as well as being at increased risk of loss from inadvertent or automatic deletion. Factors contributing to noncompliance included insufficient training and oversight as well as the difficulties of managing large volumes of e-mail. Without periodic evaluations of recordkeeping practices or other controls to ensure that staff are trained and carry out their responsibilities, agencies have little assurance that e-mail records are properly identified, stored, and preserved.