INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

The Challenges of Managing Electronic Records

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal agencies are increasingly using electronic means to create, exchange, and store information, and in doing so, they frequently create federal records: that is, information, in whatever form, that documents government functions, activities, decisions, and other important transactions. As the volume of electronic information grows, so does the challenge of managing electronic records. Both federal agency heads and the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) have responsibilities for managing federal records.

As requested, after providing some context about records management in the federal government and the roles of federal agencies and NARA, this testimony describes the challenges of electronic records management and potential means of addressing these challenges.

In preparing this testimony, GAO relied primarily on its previous work, supplemented by analysis of publicly available documents.

What GAO Found

Under the Federal Records Act, agencies are to manage the creation, maintenance, use, and disposition of records in order to achieve adequate and proper documentation of the policies and transactions of the federal government and effective and economical management of agency operations. If records are poorly managed, individuals might lose access to benefits for which they are entitled, the government could be exposed to legal liabilities, and records of historical interest could be lost forever. NARA is responsible, among other things, for providing records management guidance, assistance, and oversight.

However, as GAO has previously reported, records management has received low priority within the federal government. Prior reports have identified persistent weaknesses in federal records management, including a lack of policies and training. GAO's most recent report, in 2008, found weaknesses in e-mail management at the four agencies reviewed due in part to insufficient oversight and training. This year, NARA published the results of its first annual agency records management self-assessment survey, indicating that almost 80 percent of agencies were at moderate to high risk of improper disposition of records.

Electronic records are challenging to manage, especially as electronic information is being created in volumes that pose a significant technical challenge to the ability to organize and make it accessible. Further, electronic records range in complexity from simple text files to highly complex formats with embedded computational formulas and dynamic content, and new formats continue to be created. Finally, in a decentralized environment, it is difficult to ensure that records are properly identified and managed by end users on individual desktops (the "user challenge"). E-mail is particularly problematic, because it combines all these challenges and is ubiquitous.

Technology alone cannot solve the problem without commitment from agencies. Electronic recordkeeping systems can be challenging to implement and can require considerable resources for planning and implementation, including establishing a sound records management program as a basis. In addition, the "user problem" is not yet solved, particularly for e-mail messages. Further, automation will not solve the problem of lack of priority, which is of long standing. However, several developments may lead to increased senior-level attention to records management: NARA's use of public ratings as a spur to agency management, growing recognition of risks entailed in poor information and records management, the requirements and emphasis of the recent Open Government Directive, and the influence of congressional oversight. Senior management commitment, if followed through with effective implementation, could improve the governmentwide management of electronic and other records.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**