

Electronic Records Management (ERM) Electronic Government (E-Gov) Initiative Transferring Permanent Electronic Records to the National Archives of the United States

Susan J. Sullivan
National Archives and Records Administration
College Park, Maryland, USA

Abstract

OMB E-Gov Initiative

NARA is working with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to implement the President's Management Agenda for expanding electronic government. The President's E-Government Strategy is engaged in 24 government-wide initiatives to integrate agency operations and information technology investments. The goal of these initiatives is to eliminate redundant systems and significantly improve the government's quality of customer service for citizens and businesses through a variety of E-Gov Initiatives. This will ultimately make it simpler for citizens to receive high-quality service from the Federal Government, while reducing the cost of delivering those services.

NARA is the managing partner of one of these 24 initiatives, entitled E-Government Electronic Records Management (E-Gov, ERM) Initiative. This initiative will provide the tools that agencies will need to manage their records in electronic form, addressing specific areas of electronic records management where agencies are having major difficulties.

The projects that are part of the ERM Initiative are organized into four issue areas, each with a lead Federal agency. Of the four issue areas, NARA is the lead agency on the issue area relating to the transfer of permanent records to NARA (i.e., issue area 4). Issue area 4 focuses on the transfer of electronic records in formats not previously accepted by NARA. The articulated goal is: "to provide the tools for agencies to access electronic records for as long as required and to transfer permanent electronic records to NARA for preservation and future use by government and citizens." This paper discusses the process, products, and lessons learned in issue area 4.

Issue area 4, Transfer of Permanent E-records to NARA expands both the number of formats NARA can accept, and the media and techniques that can be used by Federal agencies when transferring their permanently valuable electronic records to the National Archives of the United States.

This project has three major components that will facilitate the transfer of electronic records to the National Archives for preservation and future use by Government and citizens.

Additional Transfer Mechanisms

Before the Electronic Records Management Initiative, NARA regulations specified that agencies transfer permanent electronic records to the National Archives of the United States via open-reel magnetic tape, 3480-class tape cartridges, and CD-ROM. As part of the Initiative, NARA revised its regulation, effective January 29, 2003, to expand the transfer methods to include higher density DLT tape media and media-less File Transfer Protocol. http://www.archives.gov/about_us/regulations/part_1228_1.html

Metadata and XML Schema Project

The objectives of the Records Management Metadata and Schema Project were to identify the metadata needed to transfer electronic records to NARA and to create the XML schema to encapsulate those metadata elements. This XML records transfer schema was completed and registered in a Federal repository in June 2003.

Additional Transfer Formats

NARA and partner agencies identified six priority records electronic formats for NARA to use in developing transfer guidance. These formats include:

- Email with attachments (issue date September 30, 2002),
- Scanned Textual Images (issue date December 23, 2003)
- Portable Document Format (PDF) (issue date March 31, 2003),
- Digital Photography (issue date November 12, 2003)
- Digital Geospatial Records (issue date April 15, 2004)
- Web Based Records (issue date September 17, 2004)

This paper describes the collaborative process NARA is using to work with Federal agencies in accomplishing the goals of issue area 4, it provides examples of records transfer guidance issued by NARA, and discusses lessons learned.

Introduction

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is an independent Federal agency that preserves permanent Federal records in the National Archives of the United States and oversees the management of all Federal records by Federal agencies.

As part of the Electronic Records Management (ERM) E-Gov Initiative to improve electronic records management in Federal agencies, and in cooperation with other Federal agencies, NARA is issuing guidance to supplement current requirements in 36 CFR 1228.270 for transferring permanent electronic records to NARA.

The guidance expands acceptable formats to enable the transfer of permanent electronic records in six priority formats to NARA. These formats include: email with attachments, scanned textual images, records in PDF, geospatial data records, and web-based records.

The guidance for transferring electronic records to NARA applies only to records scheduled for permanent retention. When permanent records do not meet the requirements in the guidance NARA will work with agencies through their appraisal archivist to ensure that valuable electronic records are not lost.

A Collaborative Process

NARA is collaborating with Federal agencies and NARA stakeholder units in developing transfer guidance. Transfer guidance for each of the six priority electronic records formats is being developed within six consecutive 'transfer cycles.' Each transfer cycle includes a test transfer process and a guidance development process.

Test Transfer Process

The test transfer process is a necessary first step before NARA can develop transfer guidance enhancing existing requirements for transfers of legal custody of these records to NARA for preservation. Experience with the test transfers allows NARA and Federal agencies to understand the work process and workload involved in transferring electronic records to NARA.

The test transfer process helps agencies understand their electronic records export requirements and also helps NARA evaluate the impact of its accessioning requirements on agencies. NARA uses the test transfers to evaluate the technical and other requirements and constraints involved in accessioning electronic records in the specified format. Ultimately, the lessons learned in the test transfer process can be used to help partner agencies and NARA enhance the life cycle management of records in each of the six priority formats.

In the test transfer process, NARA partners with Federal agencies to develop and implement guidelines (i.e., transfer guidance) for agencies to use in compiling and submitting test transfers of records in the applicable electronic format to NARA. While the test transfers may contain records scheduled as permanent and appropriate for transfer to NARA, agencies retain full legal control of the records. The test is not an actual legal transfer of records. With the agencies' permission, at the end of the transfer cycle, NARA forwards the test records to the NARA Electronic Records Archives (ERA) program for further research.

The test transfer process includes the following steps:

1. NARA invites agencies to an introductory partner agency meeting. The invitation goes to all Federal Records Officers.
2. NARA determines technical attributes of the file format that require testing and develops target requirements for diverse test sets.
3. NARA develops draft test transfer guidance and provides the guidance to external partner agencies for review.
4. NARA holds the first public meeting with agency partners. The purpose of this meeting is to review the details and schedule of the transfer cycle, to discuss the draft test transfer guidance, and to obtain input from agencies about how they are using the electronic records format. Agencies indicate their interest in participating in the test transfer process during this meeting.
5. NARA gathers information from agencies about the composition of proposed test transfers via a questionnaire. This questionnaire is used in selecting test sets offered by partner agencies.
6. Once test sets are selected, NARA notifies the approved agency participants, and updates and redistributes the test transfer guidance, as necessary.
7. Agencies submit test transfers for NARA testing and evaluation.
8. NARA performs testing, develops test results and uses them to inform draft transfer guidance.

Based on experience with test transfers, NARA can develop specific transfer guidance for agencies, and can review and modify its electronic records management policies and guidance in order to provide clearer, more complete instructions for transfers of permanent records in electronic formats to NARA.

Guidance Development Process

As with the test transfer process, the guidance development process focuses on obtaining input from partner agencies and from internal NARA organizations. The initial 'strawman' transfer guidance is based on information gathered during the test transfer process, research performed early in the cycle, input from NARA internal stakeholder units, and relevant training. The strawman transfer guidance is the first step in an evolutionary process that includes an initial review by partner agencies, an agency-wide internal review by NARA, a final review by partner agencies, and

approval by the Deputy Archivist. The following steps describe this process:

1. NARA develops and distributes the strawman transfer guidance to partner agencies for initial review.
2. NARA holds a second public meeting with partner agencies. The purpose of this meeting is to discuss results of the test transfer process, obtain agency input on the strawman transfer guidance, and to review the schedule for the remainder of the transfer cycle.
3. After the partner agency meeting, NARA updates the strawman transfer guidance based on agency feedback and forwards the transfer guidance for internal NARA agency-wide review and comment.
4. NARA updates the transfer guidance based on internal NARA input and then forwards the updated guidance for final partner agency review and comments.
5. NARA updates the transfer guidance based on partner agency comments. A final internal review is performed before approval from the NARA Deputy Archivist.
6. Upon final NARA approval, NARA issues the transfer guidance via memo to all Federal Records Officers and posts the guidance on the NARA website.

Once the transfer guidance is issued, NARA appraisal archivists are trained on the technical aspects of the new transfer guidance, and internal NARA guidelines for appraising records in the priority electronic formats are integrated within standard operating procedures for appraising records.

While NARA is expanding acceptable formats for electronic records transfer, once accessioned NARA may maintain those records in different format(s) (i.e., not necessarily the transfer format) as part of NARA's long-term preservation strategy.

Guidance for Transferring Electronic Records to NARA

The transfer guidance developed through this collaborative process is available on the NARA home page at the following locations:

Email with Attachments

Guidance for transferring email with attachments to NARA is available on the NARA home page at: http://archives.gov/records_management/initiatives/email_attachments.html

Scanned Textual Images

Guidance for transferring scanned textual images to NARA is available on the NARA home page at: http://archives.gov/records_management/initiatives/scanned_textual.html

Records in Portable Document Format (PDF)

Guidance for transferring records in PDF format to NARA is available on the NARA home page at: http://archives.gov/records_management/initiatives/pdf_records.html

Digital Photographic Records

Guidance for transferring digital photographic records to NARA is available on the NARA home page at: http://www.archives.gov/records_management/initiatives/digital_photo_records.html.

Refer to the NARA home page for future transfer guidance to be issued on geospatial data records and web-based records.

Conclusion

NARA has worked collaboratively with Federal agencies to develop and issue guidance that supplements current requirements in NARA regulations for transferring permanent electronic records to NARA. NARA has learned that the following elements are important to developing effective transfer guidance:

- Establish a diverse set of test transfers to determine the outside limits of what can be accepted under the guidance and develop clear test results.
- Work with Federal agencies to develop an understanding of the business uses of each electronic format, consider those requirements in developing transfer guidance, and seek input from those agencies.
- Ask questions and solicit specific input from Federal agencies.
- For more stringent archival requirements, establish future effective dates that will allow agencies time for implementing new requirements.
- Train appraisal archivists on technical aspects of the guidance.

Although the guidance development process evolves as NARA gains experience with each consecutive transfer cycle, the original strategy of partnering with Federal agencies and obtaining input from internal NARA organizations has proven to be successful in developing effective transfer guidance.

Reference

National Archives and Records Administration Home Page. 30 January 2004, Records Management. Major Initiatives. Electronic Records Management Initiative. <http://www.archives.gov/records_management/initiatives/erm_overview.html>

Biography

Susan Sullivan is a Certified Records Manager and Information Technology Specialist for the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. She's been a records management consultant to both the nuclear power industry and the U.S. Government. In 2002, Susan joined NARA as a member of the ERM E-Gov Team. In that capacity, she also serves as the lead NARA representative on the U.S. Technical Advisory Group for the draft PDF/A ISO Standard.