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Government Email in an Age of Risk:
Preventing Information Loss
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Case Study 2:
Issues in Moving from Policy to Governance
Vermont Email Management Challenge

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Background

In Vermont, oversight of public records management is under the authority the Secretary of State and the Vermont State Archives and Records Administration (VSARA), a division within the Secretary of State's Office, is charged with administering and implementing a statewide records management program in accordance with professional records and information management practices and principles.

VSARA's mission is to provide, protect, promote, and preserve Vermont public records, in collaboration with other public agencies, for the benefit of the public collectively served and its efforts are focused on the following four goals:

1. The public has access to authentic and reliable records for as long as needed to protect interests and to assure government accountability.
2. Public agencies have the tools and resources necessary to manage their records and information in an effective and efficient manner.
3. Records of continuing value are preserved and accessible to current and future generations.
4. Low-cost, secure repositories for public records, regardless of format, are available at an enterprise and statewide level.

While the Office strives to serve as a role model, it shares the same challenges as other public agencies when it comes to managing records and information, including email. Like others, the Office relies on records management policies and guidelines to invigorate interest and compel compliance. Ultimately, this approach has been neither effective nor efficient and we all know why: it's not all about the records. Public agencies only become proficient records and information creators, users, and managers when the technologies

they deploy truly support their business needs and transform their records and information into business assets.

Email systems in particular – which are by far the largest recordkeeping systems in most government jurisdictions – often lack integration, innovation, and other factors critical to the successful management of the records created, received and contained therein. Managing email, like all other public records, in a disciplined, coordinated and measurable manner requires a combination of people, processes and infrastructure. This means that policies alone can only go so far.

Project Method and Scope

Although the Office's internal records management policy has long addressed what kinds of email messages can be destroyed and what kinds of emails must be preserved, and has included helpful tips through a related guideline, the Office has struggled to assure employees are aware of the policy let alone following it. Further, over the years since the policy was put into action, it has become clear that there are a number of factors impeding the Office's progress in managing its email. Since these impediments are not limited to the Secretary of State's Office, a strategy was developed to:

1. Destroy messages that have met their retention requirement and are overdue for destruction.
2. Expose underlying issues relative to people, processes and infrastructure that are inhibiting and would continue to inhibit the management of email.
3. Evolve lessons learned into a statewide information governance standard for email.

In the months of May and June of 2017, the Secretary of State's Office piloted a series of email Challenges developed by the State Archivist for educating Vermont public employees on messages authorized for destruction under the State of Vermont's general record schedules, specifically schedules issued for transitory and day-to-day operational records. Coined "Thirty Days to a Slimmer Mailbox," each Challenge is purposely capped at taking no more than 15-30 minutes and also includes useful tips and instructions on how to use email management and organizational tools within Microsoft Outlook, the email application used by Vermont state government.

For the pilot, the Challenges were managed by the Deputy Secretary of State, who also serves as the Office's Records Officer, and the State Archivist, who further tailored the Challenges to the correspond with the Office's internal records management policy for applying general record schedules to Office records. Challenge results for the Office's 73 employees were tracked by Office division directors and the Office's information technology (IT) manager provided overall sizing statistics at the end of May and again at the end of June.

The State Archivist has since compiled initial data received from Division directors and the IT

Manager. Additional data points, including employees' position types and lengths of service, are also being collected and added for further insight for appraising email accounts based on employees' positions or roles. The latter, in particular, is critical for the anticipated issuance of role-based email management guidelines for the State of Vermont, which will not only address email accounts moving forward, but thousands of legacy accounts that have been maintained by individual public agency IT departments as well as the State's central IT department at a reported cost of approximately $60,000 a month.

The "Challenges"

Each of the five Challenges focuses on email messages that are common to most employees and have already been appraised as having no or limited value after a certain time has passed. The Challenges are also designed to elicit behavior or technological barriers – or both – that are preventing or will prevent improved email management now and into the future.

Challenge #1: What to do with emails sent to SoS-Everyone?? This Challenge focuses on the use of internal distribution lists. Within the context of the Secretary of State's Office, it was designed to address a list that sends email to everyone in the Office and, as a result, creates and retains 70+ copies of the same message, including attachments, in the system.

Challenge #2: What to do with newsletters & other mass mailings?? This Challenge focuses on incoming emails sent from specific email addresses that usually contain newsletters and other mass mailings and are sent to multiple people at the same time, including listervs. Within the context of the Secretary of State's Office, multiple employees are often subscribed to the same listervs and receive the same message.

Challenge #3: What about all those help & service desk messages?? This Challenge focuses on system generated messages that are solely notifications or duplicates of records and information residing in external business systems. Due to the design of the Secretary of State's Office external IT helpdesk ticketing system, employees may receive multiple notifications and duplicated information for any one ticket.

Challenge #4: Take the bite out of low-hanging fruit! This Challenge focuses on system - generated messages that come directly from the email system itself ranging from out of office messages to meeting invites and task-related reminders. Often times, these messages are hidden from employees and they do not know they are even created or received.

Challenge #5: Tackling internal unit & team communications! The last Challenge focuses on records that support the day-to-day operations, including internal workflows and processes, of a unit or team that, for the most part, should not exist

in an email. Within the context of the Secretary of State's Office, employees were asked to review routine internal team or unit day-to-day communications that are more than 36 months old and also identify those messages that meet the State of Vermont's administrative/policy record schedule for permanent retention.

For each Challenge, employees are given concrete instructions on what emails are: (1) authorized for destruction when retention requirements set forth in the State of Vermont's general record schedules have been met; and (2) are overdue for destruction. Where applicable, key references to internal records management policies and what tools in Outlook to use to complete the Challenge are also provided in the instructions. At the end of each Challenge, employees are encouraged to identify similar types of messages that fall under the same schedule and policy and, if overdue for destruction, purge.

Problems Solved, Successes, Failures, and Lessons Learned
Preliminary results based on a 53% participation rate show the Vermont Secretary of State's Office mail server is 63 GB "slimmer" after these five simple Challenges. This means that nearly a quarter of Office email was past due for destruction and being unnecessarily retained. Having started with 286 GB of email, volume was reduced to 223 GB. Of the total 66 GB of email overdue for destruction that was actually purged by participating employees, 3 GB were negated by growth in email – which directly correlates to the 3 GBs created by non- participating employees during the course of the Challenges.

Further, based on generalizations that can be made using participant data, it appears that 40% of the total email retained by current Office employees was overdue for destruction at the start of the Challenges. This means that possibly 51 GB of email is still being retained unnecessarily by those employees who did not participate[1]. If the Office includes shared mailboxes and other accounts that were purposely excluded from the Challenges, it would not be surprising if the volume of mail currently eligible for destruction is closer to 65 GB if not higher. This is a critical finding as it shows that a significant amount of email created and received by the Office is non- archival, requiring no preservation actions -- only the requisite lifecycle management, which is necessary for all records.

Further, while employee participation mattered for this specific exercise within the Office, the statistics show that for at least four of the Challenges, individual mailbox management may not necessary. The first four Challenges were all designed to explore assumptions about transitory messages for which management, including purging, could possibly be automated. The participation rate, however, also validated another theory: it is unrealistic to expect individual employees to manage their own mailboxes. Both are also crucial takeaways as they point to key aspects of the interrelationships between people and infrastructure that can be governed through improved processes, including automated information management policies.

Questions remaining, ramifications or further work or research

To date, only the quantifiable aspects of the Vermont Secretary of State's "Thirty Days to a Slimmer Mailbox" pilot have been analyzed based on the data supplied by Division directors, as made available, and the Office IT manager. Information regarding an employee's position title and also length of service are in the process of being added to the sizing data set. While seemingly minimal, a related pilot project conducted last summer using similar data for about 7,000 legacy email accounts proved to be valuable information for developing a governance framework.

This governance framework proposes managing email through a combination of automated information policies for individual email messages and role-based management for email accounts by cross walking individual employee email accounts to their appropriate record schedules through their job specifications. While not surprising that state job specifications align to state record schedules, is startling how disconnected email messages and email systems – particularly those managed at a statewide level – have become from the government functions and activities they strive support. However, this realignment, for which the Challenges provide a more detailed use case, provides tangible and realistic opportunities for streamlining automated management for certain types of messages based on the job specification of the account holder and in accordance with approved record schedules.

In addition, as both anticipated and as desired, each Challenge also exposed underlying issues that require a more qualitative approach for further analyses. In the fall of 2017, the State Archivist will be meeting with each Division separately to review the data collected thus far of each of his or her employees' mailboxes and discuss behavior or technological barriers were expressed during the Challenges. While difficult to ascertain the specifics of each barrier without further analyses, examples of those that came out during the challenges include: (1) workarounds created by staff due to lack of system integration; (2) wide-spread duplication of messages and attachments, particularly for day-to-day routine and task oriented operations; and (3) lack of training on how to use basic Office desktop applications.

Summary

When it comes to managing email, the Vermont Secretary of State's Office is not unlike other public agencies and shares the same issues and challenges. Unlike other agencies, however, the Office has a broader mandate to fulfill relative to public records management. Using its own Office and employees as a use case, the Office developed a series of five relatively simple Challenges to not only promote education and awareness among its employees of which email messages that are eligible for destruction but to effectively weed the volume of email that fell into this category.

In addition to discovering the pure volume of Office email that is transitory in nature and does not have any discernable preservation need, the results of the Challenges also provide useful insights on the behaviors and attitudes of its employees that need further review. While the scope of both behavioral as well as technological barriers are yet to be fully examined, the addition of employees' position titles and length of service, once analyzed, should yield a greater understanding of the interrelationships among people, processes and infrastructure.

Once understood, meeting VSARA's goals of having tools and resources for the efficient and effective management of email *and* preserving and making available email of continuing value for current and future generations will become less tenuous and more realistic. We are anticipating the next use case – with the Vermont Department of Financial Regulation – to commence in the fall of 2017 with the state's email system. The Vermont Office of the Governor has also recently asked to be a pilot office as well.

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[1] At the time of this writing, not all Challenge data from individual divisions has been received for analysis. Instead, mailbox sizing provided by the Office's IT Manager has been used for initial findings.