

The quest to make more efficient FOIA/public records disclosures

U.S. federal, state, and local government agencies have been involved in an ongoing quest to find ways to streamline and improve their efforts in responding to FOIA and public records requests. The journey was spurred on in great part by President Obama’s May 2012 Open Data Policy–Managing Information as an Asset initiative. When the policy was issued, it pushed federal agencies to become more open, transparent and collaborative in sharing information with the public.

Past methods of public records disclosures were developed in a bygone era of paper recordkeeping practices and are unable to meet today’s digital challenges. Still today, the government is urging agencies to step up their transparency game. A [reorganization plan](#) released by the White House in June said federal agencies collectively spend billions of dollars on paper and paper-based records management practices. The plan calls for better electronic recordkeeping practices, saying, “Electronic records will greatly improve agencies’ ability to provide public access to federal records, promoting transparency and accountability.”

As officials strive for improvements to their electronic recordkeeping and public records disclosure practices, one solution is rising to the top. Integrated technology platforms are proving to be ideal tools for processing FOIA/public records requests. Part of what makes them so ideal include their abilities to integrate directly with an agency’s existing IT, centralize records collected directly from a variety sources, and standardize disparate file types that are otherwise difficult to manage.

Agencies are relying on technology for FOIA improvements

As agencies rely more on technology, they’ve discovered that one of the chief ways it saves time and money is by automating repetitive processes such as deduplication, redaction, and categorization of records.

For example, the Department of Homeland Security [relies on automation](#) to find and remove duplicate copies of records from its FOIA responses. DHS chief FOIA officer, Sam Kaplan, said, “Hopefully, this will drastically reduce the time required on this necessary aspect of the FOIA processing. It will help assure consistency across our vast department.”

In its [Summary of Chief FOIA Officer Reports](#), the federal Office of Information Policy reports that agencies are using technology tools to sort and deduplicate documents, provide shared platforms to facilitate collaboration, and improve search capabilities to reduce the time and labor needed to process requests. Agencies reported improving FOIA efficiency in 2017 by using technology to:

- Set up internal shared drive web-links so that personnel can upload responsive emails and other records to one location where multiple users have access to review and redact documents;
- Streamline email searches across individual domains or even throughout all of an agency’s users;
- Suggest search terms and immediately report back to requesters on the search results, which narrows the scope of requests and, hence, reduces the number of documents for review.

Technology platforms provide the framework for efficient disclosures

All of these capabilities and more are available through technology platforms that find more relevant records using advanced search and smart record finding techniques and increase efficiencies in the review and redaction processes while reducing errors and risks for accidental disclosures.

Using technology platforms provides the scalable and flexible environment for processing records requests that agencies have been seeking for years. Videos, audio files, and the many varying types of multimedia files produced by online and digital communications are made accessible and searchable. Guidance from predictive coding and data analytics deliver more relevant records and better decision-making capabilities. FOIA and public records officers experience greater efficiencies through more automation and smarter workflows.

Getting the technology you need

It's one thing to know what technology you need. It's another thing entirely to get that technology in a public agency. Budgets are tight. There are many competing priorities. And the ongoing support of antiquated processes diverts resources away from investing in modern technologies. The federal government spends over [\\$80 billion dollars per year](#) on information technology, and over [75% of the IT budget](#) is spent on maintaining outdated legacy IT systems. Of course, many state and local agencies are in the same boat.

The white paper, [Building the Business Case for Investing in FOIA Technology](#), outlines 5 areas of ROI that comes with investing in the appropriate technology platform to handle public records disclosures. It provides cost-benefit analyses that you can apply to your specific circumstances in order to determine costs and savings projections for your agency.

It pays to equip yourself with knowledge. After reading the white paper, you'll be able to show how the right technology can benefit your agency. And, you'll have a better chance to capture some of the money spent on outdated IT systems to direct it toward the future rather than the past.

[CTA building the business case](#)