Tackling public records requests with technology

Responding to a records requests under Open Records acts or the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) is a multifaceted process. After a federal, state, or local government agency receives a public records request (PRR), personnel must search for and collect records that may be responsive, remove duplicate and irrelevant records from the collection, review the records and redact private and exempted information, and disclose the final set to the requester.

Several factors come into play at various stages that complicate the disclosure processes of any agency, no matter what level of government. The factors below are often discussed as individual issues that can be tackled one by one. But when you address the overall main issue causing these difficulties, you'll solve all of these issues as well as many others.

In the end, by using the right technology, agencies can handle the growing number of increasingly complex requests while producing more accurate disclosures much faster than they are now.

A single technology platform that integrates with your existing IT infrastructure is now a top choice for government agencies who need to improve their PRR disclosure processes.

Here are just four issues (among many) that can cause extensive delays in the records disclosure process. They can result in inappropriately denied requests or late and incomplete disclosures. Along with them, we also share how the use of an integrated technology platform helps tackle each issues described, showing how their use transforms your agency's entire disclosure process.

1) Many agencies need more hands on deck

Last year, the federal government received more than 800,000 FOIA requests, but agencies have only about [4,500 FOIA officers](#) to handle them. Many state and local agencies don't have a dedicated public records officer. Requests are handled by officials, assistants, clerks, IT staff, and other agency employees. Hiring freezes leave no recourse. Likewise, some state, county, and city administrative offices operate on shoestring budgets. And so, the duty to respond to PRRs is often pushed down on a list of competing priorities.

However, a technology platform allows one person to perform the work of many. Access to smart processes such as automation, assisted review, and predictive coding shave response times in half or more.

2) Fluctuations in the numbers of requests create logjams

With a 24/7 news cycle and an information-hungry public, most agencies across the board are receiving more requests. Some agencies, such as the Department of Justice and the Environmental Protection Agency, receive large numbers of requests fairly consistently. Others receive fewer requests more sporadically. A particular event or news story or a sudden interest in a subject can cause an influx of requests that create a backlog that's difficult to overcome.

Technology isn't hindered by quantity. About 30 years ago, nearly everyone everywhere, whether in private business, public office, and even in their personal lives, started generating massive amounts of data through digital communications and online activities. Integrated PRR technology platforms were designed and adapted over decades specifically to manage massive amounts of records and data quickly and efficiently.

3) Staff need more training

Interpreting and applying exemptions are prone to inconsistencies in human thinking. Other training topics include best practices for safeguarding personally identifiable information, preparing the appropriate indexes, and determining when to make proactive disclosures. Employees can also learn to communicate more clearly with requesters to avoid confusion that leads to delays and complaints.

Technology platforms use automated processes that instantly recognize personally identifiable information and apply redactions for you. They can be taught to recognize exempted information and tag it for redaction. Customized reports and indexes are automatically generated as well. Letters acknowledging receipt, explaining procedures, and asking for clarifications can be standardized and automatically generated.

4) Agencies lack established workflows that would move requests forward to completion faster

Without a dedicated public records officer to take ownership of requests, they may easily get lost or overlooked, particularly if they are passed around a department by hand. Even a small snag may cause significant delays. And these days, snags small and large loom everywhere. Online and digital communication records present a whole new set of challenges. They, along with video and audio files, are difficult to access and can take months to collect, review, and redact.

A technology platform allows employees to oversee and manage disclosures through a user-friendly dashboard. Every step, from initial intake, through collection, review, and redaction, all the way through to disclosure, is handled through a single, secure system. Advanced technology systems collect digital and online records from any source, as well as video and audio files. They centralize and standardize files of all types and makes their contents accessible for search and review.

Find more ROI when investing in technology

Adopting the proper technology tools to handle your agency's PRR disclosure processes from beginning to end significantly reduces other complicating factors or eliminates them entirely.

The advantages described here are just a start. For more insights, download our white paper *Building the Business Case for Investing in FOIA Technology*. It offers a deeper look into 5 important areas of ROI that help you show agency decision-makers more advantages agencies receive when investing in an integrated PRR technology platform.

CTA building the business case