CoSA - NARA Great Ideas Exchange Day
August 15, 2018
Case Study Template

Write one to four paragraphs per section to summarize the work/project/ideas being discussed.

1. Background about institution/program, to provide context for the following sections

The General Services Administration needed to ease the burden of records management administration. The agency had approximately 140 schedules across 5 NARA Record Groups, some dating from 1976. In many cases, like records created by the various lines of business in GSA were scheduled separately, with differing dispositions based on the business needs of individual components. This necessitated the maintenance and use of an extensive filing manual, employing granular file classifications, to manage records disposition. The agency also faced the ongoing challenge of identifying new record types, identifying obsolete record types, utilizing an expanding scope of NARA General Records Schedule items, and ensuring their records schedules were relevant with regard to electronic record keeping. In point of fact the sheer number of records schedules and schedule items had reached the limits of intellectual control. The agency proposed to NARA a complete overhaul of their records control schedules which included creating a series of big bucket/flexible records schedules that would bring their records management administration into the 21st century.

2. Explanation of work/project methods and scope

After an initial failure to develop a single, workable, comprehensive schedule, the Agency and NARA conferred and reviewed established options for developing a number of smaller bucket type schedules. The options of buckets based on record types, agency organization, and lines of business were considered. The agency decided that the line of business approach would best suit the records management administration of the agency. From there, the records management staff identified the GSA lines of business based on the Services operating within GSA. From there, the program records of each service were assigned to sub-buckets. This initial identification and compilation of record types provided the information needed to identify the number of schedules required to meet the records management needs of the agency.

3. Issues and challenges encountered in work/project

The first major challenge to developing new schedules was the age, extent, and accuracy of the legacy schedule items that had to be identified, categorized, and properly superseded by the new proposed schedules. This was accomplished by creating an Excel spreadsheet crosswalk listing of 3345 schedule items which included the original schedule number, the original GSA File Plan number, the GSA File Plan renumbering in 1994, and superseded item information including GRS references. This crosswalk provided the basis for mapping currently active legacy items to the new big bucket schedule categories, identifying obsolete schedule items, and legacy items now covered by the GRS.

The agency had to engage components, divisions and program offices to conduct records inventories to identify new record types, as well as unused or obsolete schedule items. The efforts also included establishing the transition time from paper to electronic records to tailor up-to-date disposition instructions. Additionally, the agency reviewed electronic recordkeeping systems and identified and scheduled the system content as information rather than as a discrete system. This type of description facilitated future disposition of records/information without being tied to a specific electronic system.

Another challenge was the identification of previously scheduled records now covered by the GRS. During the course of the project, NARA was revising and expanding the scope of NARA General Records Schedules. This had a direct impact on the GSA records schedule development process. As new General Records Schedules were approved and promulgated, pending schedules were revised to delete schedule items covered by the new GRS.

Even under the best of circumstances, it takes a considerable amount of time from schedule submission to schedule approval. From submission to NARA, to the Archivist's approval, the schedules must be reviewed, revised, reviewed by NARA internal stakeholders, posted for comment on the Federal Register, have comments adjudicated, further revised and reviewed, and approved. This process can take up to a year or more. This project has taken 5 years thus far, and is not yet complete. As with any long-term project, ongoing communication with program offices/stakeholders can be problematic. With changes in personnel, and evolving records management demands and practices, developing records control schedules must be a fluid process. What starts as a solid proposed schedule, can be rejected by a new program official late in the review process, or proposed dispositions can be suddenly deemed unsatisfactory. At times, an agency Records Officer can be faced with a considerable challenge addressing or overcoming the concerns of agency managers who express personal

objections to schedules that do not coincide with records management best practices or even regulatory requirements.

4. Problems solved, successes, failures, and lessons learned through work/project

a. **Solved:**

The agency succeeded in reducing their total number of schedules from 140 to 17, and the number of schedule items from 3345 to 90. A significant reduction in the number of schedule items resulted from the application of the most current NARA GRS to eligible schedule items. A further reduction occurred through identifying and eliminating obsolete or no longer used schedule items. Yet another reduction of items was accomplished through identifying similar record types that had been individually scheduled under several program offices across the five record groups. During this process NARA Record Group 291, Records of the Federal Property Resources Service, was closed because this service no longer exists. Schedule items for RG 291 were superseded by updated items in RG 121, Records of the Public Buildings Service, RG 137 Records of the Federal Supply Service, and RG 269, Records of the General Services Administration, as mission appropriate.

b. **Failures:**

An overall lack of understanding of the "big bucket" concept forced the first proposed schedule to be abandoned. Initially, the agency proposed a single schedule having five buckets categorized by agency function with a total of 40 sub-buckets. The five functions were acquisitions, business management and operations, customer management, Inspector General, public and government-wide activities, and supply chain. Unfortunately, the original proposed schedule did not serve as a "big bucket" as conceptualized by NARA. The schedule was basically an amalgamation of active GSA records schedule items given a new taxonomy. In consultation with their NARA appraisal archivist, the agency withdrew the schedule and adopted a new approach.

c. **Lessons Learned:**

The agency had a different concept of a "big bucket" approach to records scheduling than the guidance available from NARA. The agency began with the basic NARA guidelines but in the process of rationalizing legacy schedule items, and assembling a single agency-wide schedule, the resulting bucket and sub-bucket schema did not result in an implementable schedule. With a project as extensive as the one undertaken by GSA it is necessary to develop a long

range plan involving the schedule concept, process review, schedule development, stakeholder review, and agency implementation.

5. Questions remaining, ramifications or further work or research in work/project.

This project was dedicated solely to creating new schedules. Records scheduling is only one part of the records management process. The agency now must manage the implementation of the schedules' requirements. First, the agency must create and disseminate an agency filing manual for program offices to use to manage their records in accordance with the schedule. Since the schedule items are now records buckets, a filing manual is an essential reference tool for local records liaisons to manage their records. Since the new "big bucket" schedules differ significantly from the previous records schedule format, program office implementation of the new schedules and becoming accustomed to flexible disposition will require training as well as change in thinking with regard to actual business need for retention. If particular records can be retained from 3 to 7 years, this flexibility can also foster indecision regarding disposal. Flexible disposition requires flexible thinking. Finally, the new schedules also describe permanent records that must ultimately be transferred to the NARA. In addition to the efficient management of temporary records, these schedules identify records of enduring archival value that will guide the agency in retaining and transferring these records to NARA.

6. Summary

Though not yet complete, this project has been a success. The goals of both the agency and NARA are being met with the creation of new schedules that accurately identify both permanent and temporary records currently being created by GSA, and also incorporate modern retention requirements which reflect the agency's business needs.