



Highlights of [GAO-08-699T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Information Policy, Census, and National Archives, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal agencies are increasingly using electronic mail (e-mail) for essential communication. In doing so, they are potentially creating messages that have the status of federal records, which must be managed and preserved in accordance with the Federal Records Act. To carry out the records management responsibilities established in the act, agencies are to follow implementing regulations that include specific requirements for e-mail records.

In view of the importance that e-mail plays in documenting government activities, GAO was asked to testify on issues relating to the preservation of electronic records, including e-mail. As agreed, GAO's statement discusses challenges facing agencies when managing their e-mail records, as well as current policies and practices for managing e-mail messages that qualify as federal records.

This testimony is primarily based on preliminary results of ongoing work, in which GAO is examining, among other things, e-mail policies at four agencies of contrasting sizes and structures (the Department of Homeland Security, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Federal Trade Commission, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development), as well as the practices of selected senior officials.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-699T](#). For more information, contact Linda Koontz at (202) 512-6240 or koontzl@gao.gov.

FEDERAL RECORDS

Agencies Face Challenges in Managing E-Mail

GAO's Preliminary Findings

E-mail, because of its nature, presents challenges to records management. First, the information contained in e-mail records is not uniform: it may concern any subject or function and document various types of transactions. As a result, in many cases, decisions on which e-mail messages are records must be made individually. Second, the transmission data associated with an e-mail record—including information about the senders and receivers of messages, the date and time the message was sent, and any attachments to the messages—may be crucial to understanding the context of the record. Third, a given message may be part of an exchange of messages between two or more people within or outside an agency, or even of a string (sometimes branching) of many messages sent and received on a given topic. In such cases, agency staff need to decide which message or messages should be considered records and who is responsible for storing them in a recordkeeping system. Finally, the large number of federal e-mail users and high volume of e-mails increase the management challenge.

Preliminary results of GAO's ongoing review of e-mail records management at four agencies show that not all are meeting the challenges posed by e-mail records. Although the four agencies' e-mail records management policies addressed, with a few exceptions, the regulatory requirements, these requirements were not always met for the senior officials whose e-mail practices were reviewed. Each of the four agencies generally followed a print and file process to preserve e-mail records in paper-based recordkeeping systems, but for about half of the senior officials, e-mail records were not being appropriately identified and preserved in such systems. Instead, e-mail messages were being retained in e-mail systems that lacked recordkeeping capabilities. (Among other things, a recordkeeping system allows related records to be grouped into classifications according to their business purposes.) Unless they have recordkeeping capabilities, e-mail systems may not permit easy and timely retrieval of groupings of related records or individual records. Further, keeping large numbers of record and nonrecord messages in e-mail systems potentially increases the time and effort needed to search for information in response to a business need or an outside inquiry, such as a Freedom of Information Act request. Factors contributing to this practice were the lack of adequate staff support and the volume of e-mail received. In addition, agencies had not ensured that officials and their responsible staff received training in recordkeeping requirements for e-mail. If recordkeeping requirements are not followed, agencies cannot be assured that records, including information essential to protecting the rights of individuals and the federal government, is being adequately identified and preserved.