

Submitting Organization: OMB Watch
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Paper Name: Ignore e-records at own risk
Category: records management

Ignore e-records at own risk

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04/17/2000

The rule of thumb in official Washington is never say or do anything you would not want to have show up in The Washington Post. Add to that: Never *don't* do something that will land you in The Washington Post.

The case in point — and an object lesson for the executive branch — is the series of recent stories about the failure of the White House to find and examine e-mail correspondence that might have been relevant to congressional subpoenas. One story is about computer programming glitches that led to the failure to keep an archive of thousands of e-mails sent to some 500 White House employees. The other, more troubling, story is that a computer serving the office of the vice president failed to keep proper e-mail records for some top officials, including Vice President Al Gore, from 1994 onward.

"That's terrible," you say. But there must be backup tapes. Yes, there are: five-plus years' worth of backup tapes — 4,025 tapes from the offices of the president and the vice president alone. It is remarkable that they are intact. How many agency heads can say the same with assurance?

Even if the tapes are intact in agencies, they are certainly made, as in the case of the White House, as protection in case of catastrophic computer failures. Because backup tapes do not constitute a recordkeeping system, with characteristics such as an organized structure and the capability for searching, the White House estimates that it will take almost six months and \$3 million to reconstruct the e-mail messages. How many agencies could afford to do that?

What this very public case makes clear is that electronic recordkeeping, at the very least for e-mail, is in a less than ideal state at the White House. Anecdotal evidence suggests that similar requests to agencies for e-mail or for electronically created and stored documents would meet similar problems. In the case of e-mail, most agencies would either have to reconstruct backup tapes or search every relevant desktop computer and hope that messages were still there. In either case, finding the relevant materials would be time consuming and, therefore, expensive.

In the case of electronically created and stored records, it is not likely that backup tapes would exist. So unless your agency is being vigilant about printing out and filing paper copies of all electronic records, disaster — and litigation — threaten.

Most agency heads put records management somewhere near the bottom of their priority list. It is not high visibility, and it doesn't generate any rewards from the National Partnership for Reinventing Government. In fact, no one in the Clinton administration seems to care much whether it happens or not. Maybe now they will. Or at least maybe now agency heads will see the proverbial handwriting on the wall and realize that they must begin to address this complex issue, or they too can look forward to facing litigation, an angry Congress and a probe by the Justice Department. It is only a matter of time.

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