



# **DIGITIZING PUBLIC RECORDS**

Strategies & Best Practices for  
Custodians of Public Records



## INTRODUCTION

Office holders entrusted with public records must continuously work to ensure that important records are complete, accessible, and safe from natural disasters and other threats. Converting paper, microfilm, and other analog data to a computer-readable digital format is an increasingly popular solution.

However, limited funding and resources can pose challenges for some government agencies wanting to digitize historical records. Taking the time to outline a solid digitization strategy can help public officials make their case to secure funding and avoid common pitfalls.

In this white paper, we will provide best practices for planning and implementing a comprehensive digitization strategy.

Topics we will cover include:

- The benefits of digitizing public records
- Setting goals and creating a digitization strategy
- Choosing a digital records management system

## THE BENEFITS OF DIGITIZING PUBLIC RECORDS



### Increased Productivity

Digitizing historical records gives you convenient access to the information from your desktop. You no longer need to search through piles of paper or pull heavy books from their shelves, increasing the efficiency for your office.



### Cost Efficiency

Once digitized, records can be removed from circulation and sent to off-site storage, reducing maintenance costs and the space required to display hard-copy records for public access. This can add up to big savings.



### Convenient Availability

Digitized documents are readily available to your staff right from their desks, and to your public anytime from any location with internet access. This reduced traffic in your office and increases productivity.



### Enhanced Security

Records management software offers tracking and access restrictions that can be set to ensure document security and maintain confidentiality. Hosting records in a secure data center provides a layer of protection that is hard to achieve at the local level.



### Information Preservation

Paper degrades over time and handling can take a toll on hard copy records. Aging documents often disintegrate from overuse. Digitization ensures that your important records are preserved and protected for the future.



### Disaster Recovery & Business Continuity

Digitizing your records helps to mitigate the risk of loss in the event of disaster. Digital records can be quickly recovered with just a few clicks, getting your office back up and running quickly.



### Improved Public Service

Digitizing your records and providing public access will minimize the hours your staff spends handling paper documents and filing records requests. This improves efficiency in your office and service to your public.

## OUTLINING YOUR DIGITIZATION GOALS

You have a lot to consider when deciding if digitization is right for your office. Converting paper records and analog data to a digital format can deliver long-term cost-savings, but it takes time, money, and resources to implement a digitization process effectively.

Reviewing your existing and future information needs can help clarify your digitization strategy and ensure it aligns with the goals for your office. Questions to consider include:

- **What do you want to achieve?**

Digitization can address many issues within an agency. You may choose to roll out your digitization program differently depending on the desired outcome. For instance, if disaster preparedness is a key concern, you will want to focus more of your efforts on digitizing vital records. On the other hand, if the goal is to provide greater access to public records, it would be important to consider which records will be accessed most often and begin the digitization process there. Outlining overall goals will also help you conduct a cost-benefit analysis to determine the possible advantages of implementing a digitization plan. This is especially helpful when you need to secure support for funding.

- **How will the digital data be used?**

Digitization should not be undertaken without a clear deliverable in mind. Whether you want to provide access to a searchable online database of specific records or you would like to create a complete Digital Record Room, building consensus around what the end product should look like will help guide your decisions. By clarifying how and why an office's digital assets will be accessed, you can avoid frustration for the end user and staff.

- **Where will the digitized records reside, and how will you ensure their security?**

In the past, the only option was to invest in hardware and infrastructure to store digital records on-site, but today, you have the option of storing records remotely in the cloud with access via the internet. Explore both options and evaluate the benefits of each. Then select the one that best fits your specific goals.

- **How much of an investment will you make?**

Large or small, all digitization projects require an investment of time and resources. More often than not, you will need to demonstrate the potential benefits before moving ahead with your plan. A good first step is to figure out how much time your office can devote to digital imaging. Then you need to determine if you have the expertise and equipment needed for the project. This will determine how much of the work you will want to outsource.

- **What is the overall scope?**

For your digitization efforts to succeed, it's critical to determine the scope and the resources you will need before you begin. The number of documents, their format, and their physical characteristics will have a substantial impact on the time and resources you will need to convert them digitally. Looking at these key factors should help you define the scope of your digitization efforts, get buy-in, and secure the necessary resources. This will also help you in the next phase when you undertake a detailed review of your records.

- Total number of records that need to be digitized
- Types and format of documents that will be converted to digital
- Age and physical condition of the records
- Time and resources needed to prepare the records for scanning
- Digital output requirements such as resolutions, quality, and size

## CREATING A DIGITIZATION STRATEGY

Once you have defined your digitization goals, you should draft a step-by-step action plan to define your strategy, help keep your team on track, and monitor progress along the way. If you are going to outsource the project, a step-by-step action plan will help a third-party vendor collaborate with you to successfully accomplish your digitization goals.

There are four steps that can help you organize the process:

### STEP 1

#### Records Review



Conduct a detailed review of all records and develop an inventory of the records that need to be digitized. This should include the record types, formats, size of documents, and quantity, along with specific details about their locations. You will also need to review the physical condition of your records and determine what preparations need to be done before documents can be scanned – removing staples, separating books, etc. A detailed review is a valuable exercise to complete before scanning begins.

### STEP 2

#### Determine Project Phases



Once you have completed a detailed inventory of your records, you will want to consider the resources available to you, how quickly you want the project completed, and when funds will be available. Based on these considerations, you will need to decide if all of the records will be digitized at once, or if digitization will be implemented as a multi-phase project. Common approaches you can take:

#### INDEXES FIRST

Many office holders choose to scan all of their index information first and then place the information online. This allows users to search for the information they need and identify the book and page locations via computer. Once they have this information, searchers can retrieve the documents from your record vault. This helps to streamline the process and reduce the amount of time searchers need to spend in your office.

#### GROUPED BY YEARS

Another popular option is to segment your digitization project into groups based on the time spans of your records. For example, you might start with the most recent decade that needs to be digitized and then work back through your records until they have all been digitized.

### STEP 3

### Choose a Digital Records Management System



Before you invest time and resources into digitizing records, you should consider how you plan to manage the data. You will also want to develop an ongoing process of migrating records from older to newer platforms as technology evolves. It is important to evaluate your options based on your current and future digitization needs. Sometimes, office holders choose to reindex the data and incorporate it into their existing records management software. You may also choose to manage the data with an in-house system that you maintain. In many cases, it makes more sense to partner with a reputable outside company that specializes in records management.

#### REINDEXING

For many years, local governments have enjoyed the benefits of automated land records systems. Today's tech-savvy searchers expect easy access to records, but most jurisdictions only have electronic records dating back to the '70s or '80s when their first land records management system was installed. Traditionally, manually reindexing the data was the only method available to expand the historical database. A successful reindexing project increases value to the searching public, but the process is extremely time-consuming, expensive, and opens up liability risks as humans input the data.

#### IN-HOUSE DIGITAL RECORDS MANAGEMENT

You can choose to maintain your digital records in-house without reindexing. Digital records can be stored in a traditional file/folder structure on a computer in your office. Storing your records in-house allows you to retain complete control over the data and provides access to your information without dependence on the internet.

However, there are also some downsides to choosing to manage your records in-house. This method lacks robust search capabilities and does not provide convenient access to your information. A larger up-front investment is usually required for the hardware and software needed to scan and store records. Your office will also be responsible for implementing an effective backup system and making sure all systems are compatible with one another. Unless you have solid internal resources, you may be better off entrusting your records to a records management expert.

#### DIGITAL RECORDS MANAGEMENT SERVICES

Partnering with an outside provider for digital records management can give you convenient access to your records without the expense and liability of reindexing. Many companies offer software programs that allow you to search and view records in the same way you search for hard-copy records. They do this by combining digital copies of the indexes and related record books with unique retrieval software. Placing your historical records online provides a valuable service to your constituents and can generate significant revenue for your office if you choose to charge for access. This method provides you with secure, convenient access to documents with the ability to limit certain users

or departments. A reputable provider will also electronically back up your information, providing a layer of disaster recovery and security that is difficult to achieve at the local level.

When selecting an outside provider for digital records management, look for these criteria:

- A solution that provides anytime, anywhere access to your records from any location with an internet connection.
- Software with robust search capabilities that allow you, your staff, and the public to easily find the information they need.
- A system that can seamlessly integrate with multiple applications.
- Data backup tools that provide remote access to records, insuring business continuance if your office is inaccessible.
- Records hosted in a secure, off-site data center that meets strict quality and security standards.

## ONLINE INDEX BOOKS (OIB)

OIB is a software solution offered by Cott Systems that provides remote access to important historical records. OIB combines digital copies of your indexes and related record books with unique retrieval software to mimic exactly how you search hard-copy records today. This gives you searchable access to your records without the cost, time, and liability risks associated with reindexing. OIB gives you complete electronic access to handwritten indexes and land documents filed prior to electronic records management.

### STEP 4

### Planning



If you choose to undertake the digitization process in-house, you will want to begin assigning roles and responsibilities, evaluating resources, and planning your project. This is also the time to locate and evaluate outsourcing options. A reputable records management partner can be a valuable asset in planning and executing your digitization strategy. They have expertise and experience that can help guide you through the process. It is also possible to utilize both internal resources and outsourcing.

You will also need to clarify the project's timeline as part of your planning process and populate the important milestones and target dates so that everyone stays on track.

#### IMPORTANT TIP

Do not forget to determine and plan for how much prep time you will need before scanning can begin. Digitization projects often require as much time for preparing documents as they do for scanning them to digital format.



## CONCLUSION

To keep pace in today's electronic world, many government offices are providing digital public access to records in a form that is easy to retrieve, store, and share. Digitization is an effective solution for maintaining the transparency, accessibility, and timeliness of records, but it should not be undertaken without careful planning. Office holders who take the time to create a digitization strategy and partner with a records management expert are able to balance the initial investment with the potential benefits, delivering on their commitment to the public.

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## ABOUT COTT SYSTEMS

An innovator in records management for more than 130 years, Cott Systems is today's technology leader for recording, imaging, and searching public records. Cott Systems empowers local government offices to improve efficiency, provide superior constituent service, and preserve the official records entrusted to their care. Decades of dedication make it possible for Cott Systems to provide all the services a local official needs to preserve and modernize the rich history of their jurisdiction. In addition to industry-leading software solutions, Cott Systems also offers traditional data and imaging services: redaction, backfile document conversion, storage, scanning, reindexing, and microfilm. For more information about Cott Systems, please visit [cottsystems.com](http://cottsystems.com).