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NARA moved email to the cloud at 'lightning speed'

- By [Rutrell Yasin](#)
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It is no small feat to move nearly 8 terabytes of email data to a cloud-based messaging and collaboration system. But try doing it in six months.

Project at a Glance

Name of Project: Cloud-based Email Service

Office: National Archives and Records Administration

Technology: Google Apps for Government messaging and collaboration software; Exchange My Mail, a provider of BlackBerry hosting services; and ZL Technologies' United Archive, which provides cloud-based message storage and electronic records management.

Time to implementation: Six months

Before: NARA's email was on an aging, 15-year-old client/server system that was expensive to maintain and prevented the agency from aligning records management with emerging technologies such as cloud computing, mobility and social media.

After: The move to the cloud has improved the workforce's collaboration and mobility, giving them a suite of features for email, collaboration, archiving and records management with full search functions and seamless integration with NARA's authentication system.

The National Archives and Records Administration, keeper and preserver of the nation's records, faced such a task when it decided late last year to move nearly 5,000 employees' email to the Google Apps for Government cloud-based messaging and collaboration suite.

"We were running on the same email system for about 15 years, a client/server-based system, and some of our users had email going back to the late 1990s. So just from a cultural standpoint it was a major move for us," said Brian Connor, NARA's technical lead for the project.

Not only did officials face the daunting task of moving massive amounts of data, but the project also involved linking three distinct cloud environments to accommodate NARA's messaging, mobility and records management requirements.

Yet the agency completed the project in six months — "lightning speed for NARA," Connor said — thanks in

large part to the introduction of multidisciplinary, "integrated project teams" composed of both NARA and contractor experts. Led by primary contractor Unisys, the teams brought together management and technical expertise ranging from migration to authentication, security and records management so that knowledgeable people were in place as important policy decisions were made during the transition.

Senior management also made sure that employees were prepared for the migration via online training and regular meetings.

Another key step: The teams overcame some of the technical challenges of the migration by setting up a system for dual delivery of email and allowing data to be moved prior to a full-scale user migration. Email was migrated to staffers' new mailboxes in Googles Apps while they were still receiving email in the old system, Connor said.

Security was another hot button, especially since three different clouds were being linked. Google Apps for Government's messaging and collaboration services had to be connected with Exchange My Mail, a provider of BlackBerry hosting services, and ZL Technologies' United Archive, a cloud-based records management system.

To ensure security across these systems, NARA had to conduct a strict review of all of the providers' security plans. The team also had to make sure the ZL Technologies archive had sufficient redundancy and that the agency could retain ownership of data.

NARA officials haven't calculated precisely how much the agency has saved by moving to the cloud yet. Improvements in the employees' collaboration and mobility experiences are easier to measure. Prior to going live with Google Apps in spring 2013, only about 200 employees had remote access to email. Now the entire workforce has that capability via a secure portal.

Since users can access email through their Web browsers, IT administrators do not have to maintain client software on desktops. Employees also have more access agencywide because they can access email from any workstation. Additionally, data can be shared through features such as Google Drive, which lets different people work collaboratively on the same document at the same time, Connor said.

Key members of the team besides Connor included Aaron Woo, project manager; Hannah Bergman, NARA's assistant general counsel; Michael Wash, CIO; and Leo Scanlon, chief information security officer.

About the Author

Rutrell Yasin is is a freelance technology writer for GCN.