NARA:
A Digitization Case Study

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is considered the official record keeper of the United States of America. In existence for over 75 years, NARA is responsible for a significant amount of records. With the changing times and technology, NARA has been faced with the challenge of becoming an organization focused on making these records available in a digital format. NARA has risen to the challenge in a multitude of ways. It continues to transform and discover new ways to meet the demands of its customer, the American people. This case study explores the major steps taken towards the digitization effort, and the biggest challenges faced. It covers the successes met thus far and expected plans for growth in the future.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is the official record keeper of the nation. An independent executive agency, NARA, strives to preserve and provide access to items created by the United States Government. For the past seven decades, NARA has ensured continued access to the crucial documentation of American citizens and their Government's actions (National Archives and Records Administration, 2007).

President Franklin Roosevelt established the National Archives in 1934, but the plans had been set in motion for it years prior. Concern for records preservation was raised as early as Thomas Jefferson's presidency. In the early 1930s, ground was

broken for the National Archives building in Washington, D.C. President Herbert Hoover laid the cornerstone in 1933 (National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.c.). On June 19, 1934, President Roosevelt signed into law: "An Act to establish a National Archives of the United States Government, and for other purposes." The bill, H.R. 8910, created the Office of the Archivist of the United States. All Archives and records of the United States Government were under the trust of the Archivist (Ross, 2004).

NARA is responsible for preserving and providing access to the U.S. Government's collection of documents recording the important events in American history (National Archives and Records Administration, 2008). Its archival holdings include more than 10 billion pages of documents in formats including maps, charts, photographs, artifacts, and recordings. Its holdings are the property of the American public and the agency strives to ensure the public has access to these materials (National Archives and Records Administration, 2008). Of all the documents created by the Federal Government, only 1-3% are considered important enough to retain permanently (National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.f.). Today, there are NARA facilities in seventeen states, from the East Coast to the West Coast (National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.c.).

SETTING THE STAGE

Prior to the age of the Internet, those that wanted to research and enjoy the holdings of the National Archives had to do so in person or by mail. NARA really began to change with the times in the early 1990s, with the Electronic Access Project. About 124,000 digital copies were made available through the Archival Research Catalog (ARC) on NARA's Web site. The copies included over 15,000 textual documents, 66 architectural and engineering drawing items, 60 artifact items, 323 maps and charts, and 58,399 still pictures (National Archives and Records Administration, 2007). At the time of the project's completion, NARA was well aware of the difficulty involved with the creation and preservation of digitization. Its available resources at the time were not able to meet the demands of large-scale digitization projects.

In 2006, NARA drafted its strategic plan, which set the ball rolling for a major digitization effort. The United States Archivist at the time, Allen Weinstein, is credited with the start of this effort. He placed the most emphasis on addressing the challenges of Federal electronic records, eliminating the backlog of unprocessed records, including classified records and expanding NARA's leadership and services in managing the national government's records (Weinstein, 2007). The plan acknowledged that increasing demand by users for more online records played a major role in its focus on intensifying the digitization effort. NARA stated its dedication