



Client

Benton County, Washington

Overview

Benton County is located in the south-central portion of Washington State with a population of 204,000.

Central Services is an internal service department under the county administrator with 12.5 FTE. Central Services provides IT and telecommunication services for the county administrative departments and the elected officials' offices. These services are delivered across three major sites — the courthouse at the county seat in Prosser, Washington; the Justice Center campus; and the Kennewick Annex/Juvenile Justice Center in Kennewick, Washington — and five smaller facilities through a wide area network (WAN). Benton County employed on-premise message archiving since 2006 and migrated to the Smarsh-hosted archiving solution in the first quarter of 2012.

Risk Mitigation & Future Proofing for Small to Medium-Sized Organizations: Benton County Employs Smarsh Archiving

Too often, smaller organizations and government entities ignore their potential compliance failures and future operational requirements associated with electronic messages and social media. The majority of these organizations typically wait until a “material” development triggers a reassessment of their priorities. Benton County (Washington State) is a great example of an organization that took a mindful risk mitigation approach to its IT infrastructure, archiving, and compliance needs. Instead of waiting for a high-profile litigation event or a catastrophic breakdown of its existing messaging and archiving solutions, the county planned its migration to the Smarsh cloud-based archiving solution. The migration to the Smarsh archiving solution is intended to mitigate potential liabilities as well as support the county's future IT initiatives around email migration, social media expansion, and data and storage operational improvements. Organizations with similar operational and compliance profiles to Benton County are advised to consider the following:

- Identify, assess, and plan for future compliance, legal, data management, and application performance risks.
- Identify and collaborate very closely with internal stakeholders very early on. Collaboration will facilitate intra-organizational buy-in and help prioritize requirements and constraints.
- Incorporate the long-term strategic objectives with the organization's architectural and change management requirements.

Business and Compliance Drivers

The following developments underpinned Benton County’s decision to adopt message archiving:

- Compliance to Washington state sunshine law. Benton County had been archiving all email since 2006 in order to ensure electronic communications between the county commissioners complied with state regulations regarding public access to open meetings.
- Support data management and storage efficiency objectives. The digitization of communications and transactions between the citizens and local government entities increased the volume of data that must be managed and stored by local governments. This development spurred Benton County to initiate a program that would improve the efficiency of its storage and data management operations and at the same time enhance the quality of services provided to its local citizens.
- Mitigate litigation risks. The 1972 Washington Public Records Act imposed stringent requirements regarding the production of public records. Local government entities in Washington State were penalized with large financial penalties as a result of compliance failures. These events gave rise to a statewide cottage industry of multiple intensive requests for public records with the intent of suing the local government entity when it is unable to produce the requested information. Benton County sought a solution that would mitigate its potential exposure to these compliance lawsuits.

Challenges and Solution

Benton County started archiving email in 2006. This action was in response to issues raised by the state auditor during the routine audits for compliance with regulations around open meetings. Although the audits found no evidence of inappropriate communications, the final report concluded that the county was still liable for producing records. This solution went online in 2006 and was housed and maintained within the county infrastructure. At that time, cost and compatibility with the county email system, Novell GroupWise, were the primary considerations in the selection of the county’s message archiving system.

Benton County’s Central Services supported 720 mailboxes. No mailbox quotas were imposed except on external emails. Over time, county employees developed habits of using the email system for storing and sharing very large attachments. This development further taxed the performance of the messaging and legacy archiving applications.

As the on-premise archive grew, Benton County struggled with completing word and phrase searches successfully. Benton County eventually adopted quotas on external and internal messages to stay in line with the practices of other government agencies. But it still needed to address the performance of its messaging and archiving Applications.

During the first quarter of 2011, a series of public records requests resulted in incomplete and failed searches, even after several attempts by the legacy archive vendor to resolve the failure. The county dedicated a full FTE to work on the archive searches with the archive vendor.

As a result of these performance and compliance issues, the Benton County Board of Commissions directed Central Services to seek out an alternative solution. Concern over the potential liabilities that stem from non-compliance to the Public Records Act was the primary motivation behind the search for a new archiving solution.

The primary business requirements were:

- Search and retrieval performance
- Support for cloud or hybrid delivery model

Technology Considerations

The following developments influenced Benton County’s purchase decision:

- Reducing the strain of data growth on the county’s storage infrastructure was the secondary motivation behind the search for a new archiving solution. The on-premise legacy archive outgrew the traditional tape-based backup option several years prior. The county moved the on-premise archive to a storage area network with replication to support disaster recovery and business continuity objectives.
- Benton County completed a five-year IT strategic plan prior to the search for the email archive solution commenced. At that time, the plan did not address email archiving but included recommendations to review potential migration off GroupWise. The overall plan also included options for cloud and software as a service (SaaS).

The committee tasked with the identification and selection of the archiving solution was made up of personnel who reported to the county administrator. The charge to the committee was to quickly research either a cloud service or a hybrid service/on-premise system to replace the current on-premise system. The selection committee evaluated three vendors: Smarsh, Postini-Google, and Proofpoint.

The following factors tipped the committee’s decision to Smarsh:

- A SaaS offering
- Proven track record in message archiving with a significant base of government customers of varying sizes
- Location of the datacenters
- Support for Novell GroupWise until a migration to Exchange was completed

Essential Guidance

The Benton County case study illustrates the following:

Smaller organizations, such as SMBs and government entities, benefit by taking a strategic approach to meeting their archiving requirements.

State sunshine laws and open records regulations present potential liabilities for local government, as well as state and federal agencies.

Smaller organizations benefit from having a long-term IT strategy that addresses future requirements around scale, performance, and deployment of new technologies. Organizations with similar operational and compliance profiles to Benton County are advised to consider the following:

- Identify, assess, and plan for future compliance, legal, data management, and application performance risks that may ensue from the combination of past technology decisions and external developments.
- Identify and collaborate closely with internal stakeholders very early on. Collaboration will facilitate intra-organizational buy-in. It would also help prioritize technical and business requirements and constraints.
- Incorporate the long-term strategic objectives (including business services, compliance, legal, and IT) for the architectural / change management requirements for the message archiving project. Eg; plans for cloud migration, the adoption of a new email platform, and the expansion of the county’s social media initiatives influenced Benton County’s selection criteria.

Results

The migration to the Smarsh Professional Archive enabled Benton County to realize the following major objectives:

- Move the email archive into an environment that was more responsive to the demands for public disclosure requests, thus mitigating potential compliance and legal liabilities. According to Benton County, the Smarsh interface and search tools have been successfully used to catch up the backlog of disclosure requests and to quickly respond to subsequent requests.
- Keep up with the infrastructure demands of the growing archive.
- Align with the long-term IT strategy to leverage cloud-based services.
- Support medium-term plans to include social media compliance.

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Scalable for organizations of all sizes, the Smarsh platform provides customers with compliance built on confidence. It enables them to strategically future-proof as new communication channels are adopted, and to realize more insight and value from the data in their archive. Customers strengthen their compliance and e-discovery initiatives, and benefit from the productive use of email, social media, mobile/text messaging, instant messaging and collaboration, web, and voice channels.

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