GRANICUS

2022 Public Records Complexity

BENCHMARK REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

The Public Records Benchmark was formerly the Peers in Public Records Index (PiPRIndex) created by GovQA in 2021. With GovQA's acquisition by Granicus in 2021, the PiPRIndex has been refreshed as the Public Records Benchmark Report. We've used the same metrics but adjusted our calculations to ensure the changes we're seeing have equal weight in the Benchmark number (formerly the Index). Contact us if you have questions.

Universally required by law (with functional variations from state to state), public records requests siphon time and resources from your organization's budget. The more complex the requests, the longer they take to fulfill, leaving fewer resources available for your other core missions. In addition, poor public records request processing performance adds risk — financial, public trust, and litigation risks to name a few. On the flip side, this very public service, when done right, can have notable benefits to your organization and the people it serves.

In this report, you'll get an overview of the eight key factors identified by Granicus that add to complexity (and costs) in public records request processing. These metrics have been tracked over hundreds of government agencies across the U.S. for the last four and a half years.

The data show that overall complexity in public records has increased by 52% since Q1 2018. This increase is a compiled benchmark figure representative of huge increases in seven of the eight component metrics. The only metric which has decreased over time is the average number of staff interacting with requests (down 48%). It points to potential challenges when you contrast that value with the 112% increase in total time spent fulfilling public records requests. The public records request processing workload is large and getting larger – creating a steep hill for your remaining, overwhelmed staff; and diverting time and energy from your other important initiatives.

This benchmark report provides the quantitative data needed to support investment in modern government technology today...to solve existing and future challenges for those responsible for providing public records services – which is all governments. Want to know more about how we measure public records complexity and what you can do to reverse the pressures on your budget, risk profile, staff morale, and public trust? Read on.

Quantifying Complexity in Public Records

As the leading provider of cloud-based automated workflow (SaaS) software for governments, GovQA (now part of Granicus) is singularly positioned to provide actionable data for the public records industry (like the NASDAQ does for stocks, ADP Jobs Report does for employment, and the consumer price index does for prices of goods and services).

Historically, our industry has relied on annual request volume as an indicator of how challenging the job of public records managers was. But we knew there was more to the story — beyond request volume, our industry was missing quantitative data.

Not all records requests are created the same. You can have very easy to process requests – like those for arrest records – AND you can have very complex requests that require processing of many responsive records or very large files such as video files; or those that require clarification to narrow scope and several layers of interactions with reviewers leading to a higher total time spent fulfilling each request.

These circumstances are the metrics we uncovered in our data - allowing us to quantify the challenges you face.

> **"** Given the increased awareness of public records accessibility; the media trying to gather data for 24-hour news cycles; and the increase in successful litigation in compliance lawsuits; this complexity trend is likely to continue."** *— Cindi Mansell CRM, MMC, Master Municipal Clerk & Records and Information Manager*

Granicus is 100% focused on the public sector and has:

30+ years' experience in the government space

serves **5,500+ federal, state & local government agencies** around the world
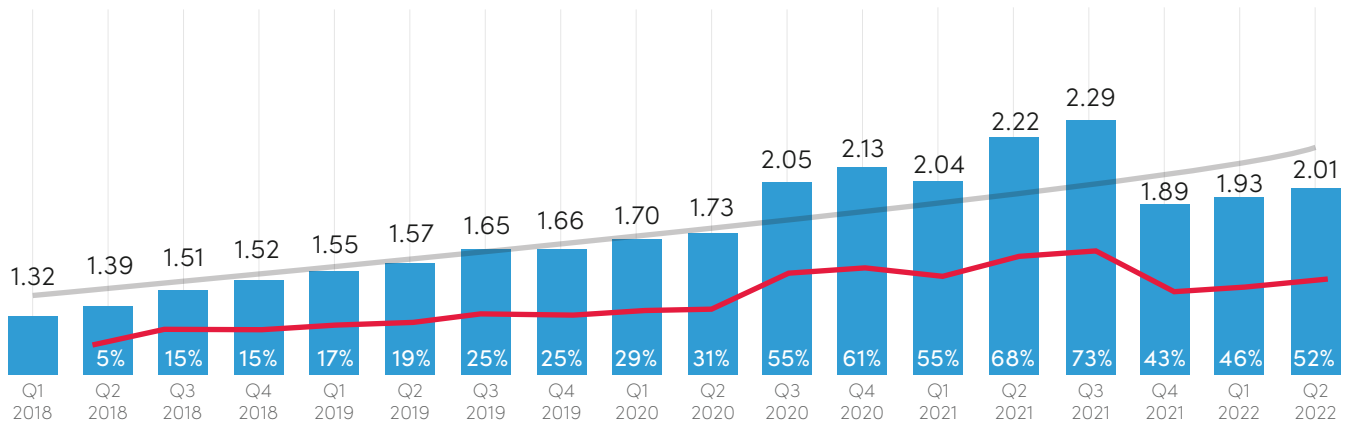
a **network of 600+** FOIA clients

assists **500K employees across all 50 states** (500+ state departments), as well as **400+ federal cabinet-level government agencies** (58 defense partners)

Using a portion of this broad and diverse customer base, Granicus has selected anonymized data from ~240 representative agencies that includes state, county and city organizations falling within a high standard deviation of each metric to build the Public Records Benchmark. Data is adjusted for volume and tracked quarterly.

The Public Records Benchmark report quantifies predictable growth (or retraction) in complexity from "peers" across the U.S. This statistically significant data can be used to understand the mechanics of the public records process; assess the impact of significant events on information sharing; forecast the future state of the industry; and support tech investments to streamline workflows.

Historical Trend Public Records Benchmark Complexity Report

The Public Records Benchmark Complexity Report is composed of two markers: the Records Marker; and the Activities Marker.

1.32	1.39	1.51	1.52	1.55	1.57	1.65	1.66	1.70	1.73	2.05	2.13	2.04	2.22	2.29	1.89	1.93	2.01
	5%	15%	15%	17%	19%	25%	25%	29%	31%	55%	61%	55%	68%	73%	43%	46%	52%
Q1 2018	Q2 2018	Q3 2018	Q4 2018	Q1 2019	Q2 2019	Q3 2019	Q4 2019	Q1 2020	Q2 2020	Q3 2020	Q4 2020	Q1 2021	Q2 2021	Q3 2021	Q4 2021	Q1 2022	Q2 2022

The Public Records Complexity Index – up 52% since Q1 2018, peaking at 73% increase in Q3 2021

RECORDS MARKER

The Records Marker is an indicator of the complexity of the public record files themselves. This marker includes four figures — the last two of which are grouped under "File Types". Detailed descriptions of each can be found in the Metrics Definitions section below. The four figures included in the Records Marker are:

Quantity of Response Documents (indicates scale)	**Sizes of Response Documents** (indicates scale)	**File Type Group: Video Files** (indicates scale and diversity)	**File Type Group: OCR files** (indicates scale and diversity)

ACTIVITIES MARKER

The Activities Marker is an indicator of user activities related to processing public records requests. Find detailed definitions in the Metrics Definitions section below. The Activities Marker includes three figures:

Average User Interactions
(indicates connectivity)

Clarification Emails Generated
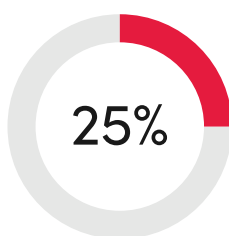(indicates connectivity)

Total Time Spent
(indicates scale)

To calculate the Public Records Benchmark, the Records and Activities Markers are weighted against Request Volume – which is the total count of public records requests received by an agency.
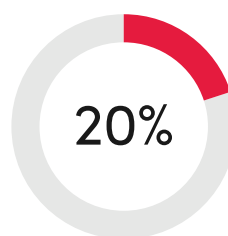
How the Public Benchmark was Created

To calculate complexity, Granicus analyzed blind, anonymized data from over 500 organizations. We identified those organizations that fall within a high standard deviation of values within that specific metric. That lead us to ±240 member organizations that represent the most common experience across all 8 metrics.
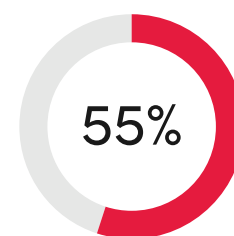
The ±240 member agencies include:

25%
State

20%
Counties

55%
Cities

Adjusted for volume and tracked quarterly, Granicus is able to quantify the growth in the complexity organizations will continue to face across the country.

The Granicus Public Records Benchmark Complexity Report looks at anonymized data over time which may indicate an increase or decrease in the scale and diversity of public records request files and the time and connectivity required to process requests. These trends may be helpful to state and local government agency leadership in decision making regarding budgeting, staffing levels, and technology investments.

METRICS DEFINITIONS

Complexity

Complexity, by definition, is the state of being intricate – having many interconnected parts or features. The causes of complexity as they relate to public records are:

Scale
(the number of elements in the system)

Diversity
(the extent which elements are different)

Connectivity
(the inter-relationships between components)

Drivers of Complexity

If we step back and think about what the drivers of public records might be, we might include:

Legislation changes (laws and mandates) which add:

- New release/retention schedules

- New exemptions

- New reporting requirements

- New types of responsive records such as: police personnel files, bodycam video, or the reclassification of records as newly responsive (such as adding state legislative records)

Technology changes, from paper to:

- Email

- Text Messages

- Social Media Posts

- Drone Footage

- Bodycam Video

- Self-destructing Messages

World changes:

- Pandemic Shift to Remote Work

- Police Reform Movements

- The Great Resignation

- Cyber Attacks

- Elections

- Extreme Weather Events

- Election Uncertainties

The following are key metrics selected by Granicus to paint a picture of the effect these complexity drivers have on public records departments.

Request Volume

When measuring public records, request volume is the most common and helpful metric to watch; and it is usually measured in requests per month or year. In this report, Request Volume is measured as the total count of requests created by member organizations. Annual request volume varies from agency to agency – but in general, the larger the agency, the higher the request volume. Annually, a populous state, county, or city agency can have 4,000 to 15,000+ public records requests; a smaller city or county agency might have 100 or fewer public records requests. High profile events (such as officer-involved shootings) can trigger a surge in public records requests for any affected agency. Critical incidents often create a flood of requests around the time of the incident and for several months afterward as the public, the media, and other agencies strive to understand what transpired and how the event was handled internally by the agency. Request volume is increasing — read more about this here: **bit.ly/blog-request-volume**

Request Volume Average Per Quarter

Request Volume may be the most critical quantifier of complexity as it relates to scale.
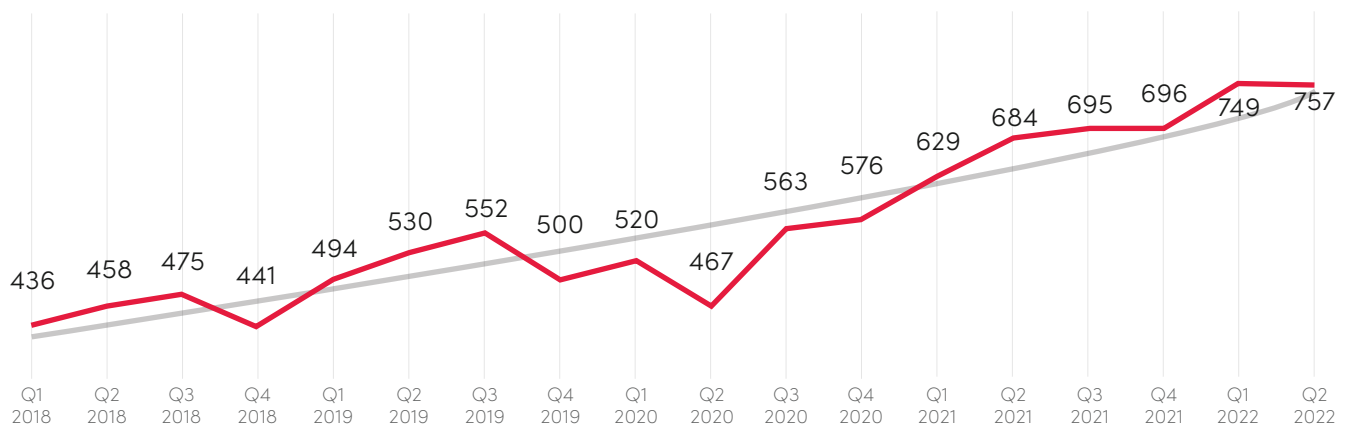
*Request Volume – Up 74% since 2018*

RECORDS MARKERS

Quantity of Response Documents (count)

The quantity of response documents affects the overall complexity of public records requests because each document added increases the number of required interactions. Each response document file must, be uploaded to the request management system. This can be simplified using bulk upload, folder upload, or drag and drop functions within GovQA. But, since a key step in processing public records is "Review" prior to release, each document must be opened, read, and possibly redacted prior to release.

So by this definition, the more documents there are in the system, the more complex or numerous the actions needed to complete processing. In the case of agencies not using software to manage public records requests, the quantity of response documents plays an even greater role in increasing the complexity of public records request processing.

Quantity of Response Documents

Measures the scale of complexity as the total count of individual documents sent to requesters, averaged by volume.
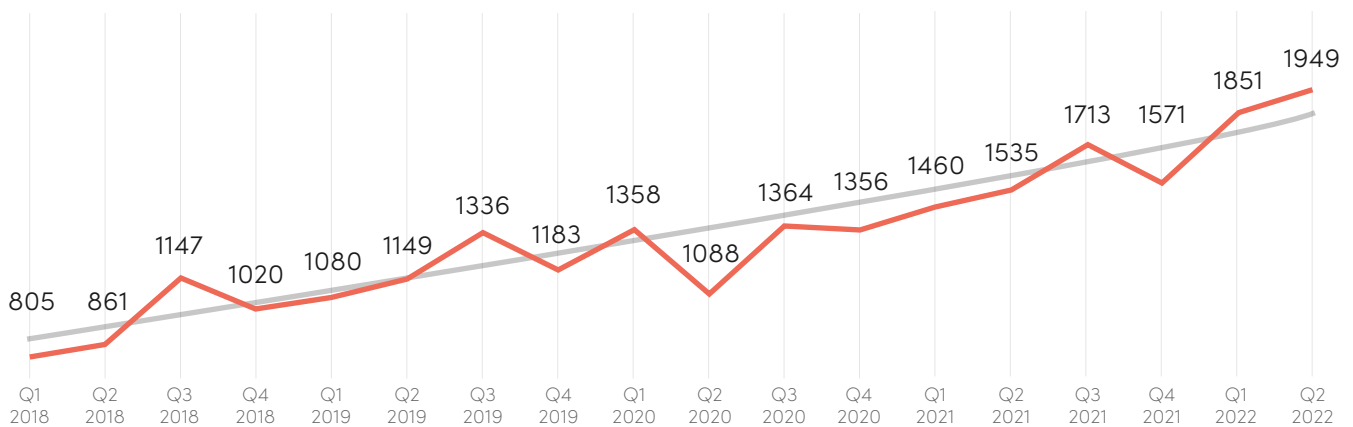
Quantity of Response Documents (count) – When adjusted for volume, up 39% since 2018

File Size of Response Documents (MB)

While the sheer quantity of files counted in the metric plays an important role in assessing complexity, the file size of those documents is also key. Larger files can contain more pages (which in turn require more time to review and redact). Large files can also be large because they contain images (and audio or video data) which can introduce additional redaction challenges and time to process. Large files create complexity by generally taking more time to manage within an agency's public records processing system.

File Size of Response Documents

Measures the scale of complexity as the total size of all documents sent to requesters.
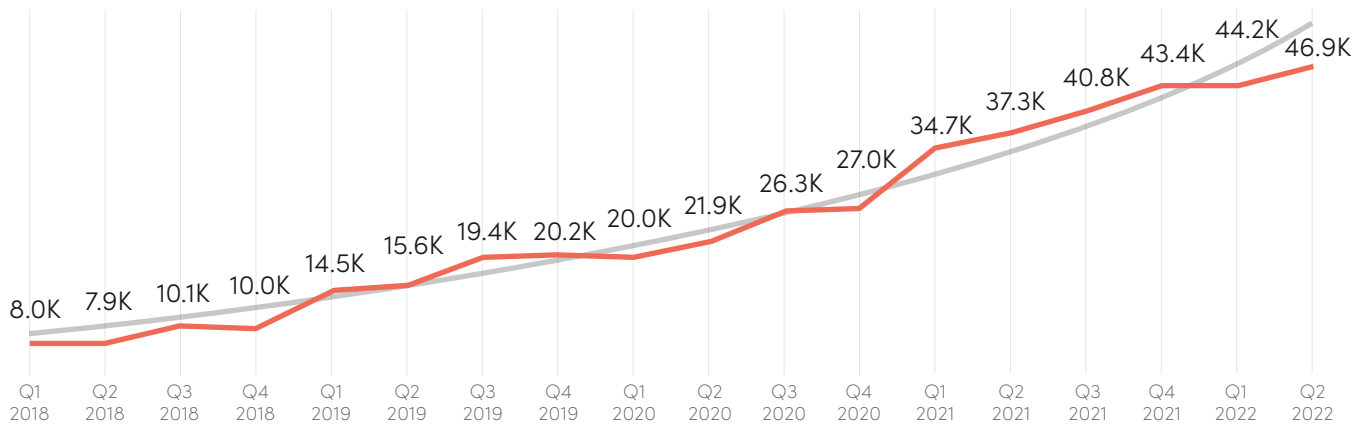
File Size of Response Documents (MB) – When adjusted for volume, up 237% since 2018
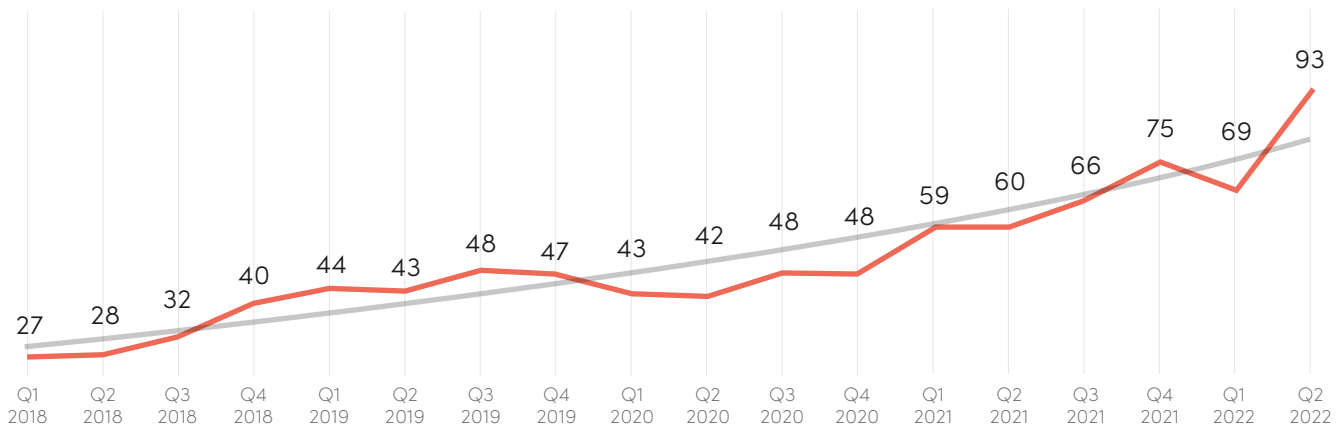
Video Files (Count)

Not all agencies manage video files; but for those that do, video files present unique challenges. Almost by definition, video files are some of the largest records created or owned by agencies. They take longer to upload and download due to their size (particularly on slower networks or Internet connections). They also can present enormous challenges in terms of redaction due to the time and skill involved in viewing videos to identify people, license plates, laptops and other sensitive objects and audio and then manipulating redaction tools to fully obscure or remove that data prior to release.

Using AI-enabled software to automatically identify these elements back and forth in the video/audio timeline is a new way to reduce some of the complexity in video/audio redaction. Granicus has partnered with Veritone (VERI) to integrate video and audio redaction tools into the GovQA workflows, allowing video/audio redactions up to 90% faster than with manual methods. Whether using sophisticated AI tools or manual methods of redaction, however, the more video files an agency must process for public records requests, the more Complexity can be increased.

Video Files Uploaded to System

Measures both the complexity scale and diversity as the count of all video files inside the system (identified by file extension such as .mp4, .avi, and .mov).

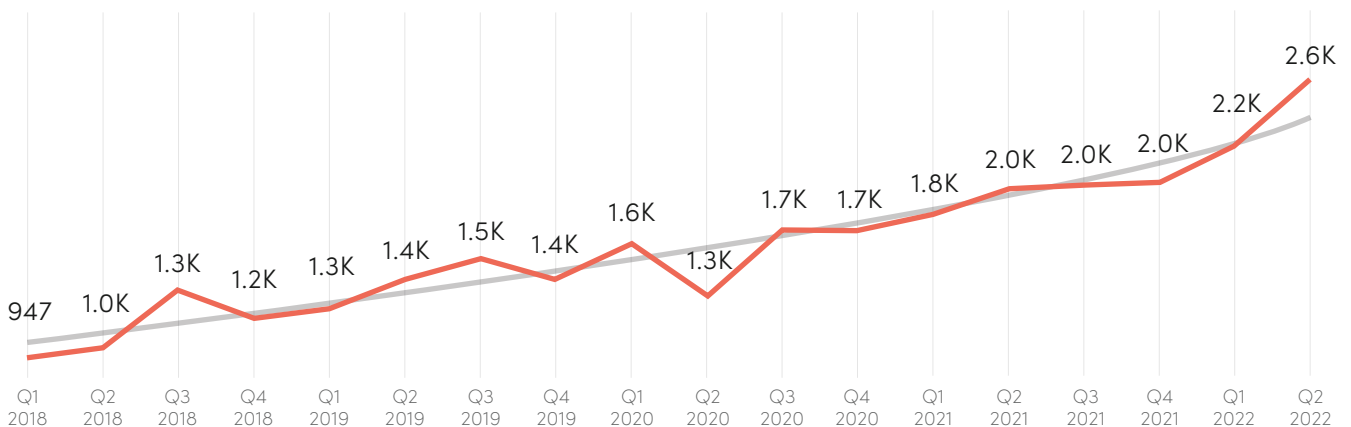*Video Files (count) – When adjusted for volume, up 98% since 2018*

OCR Processed Images & PDFs (Count)

These file types are not managed by all agencies; but for those that do, they introduce diversity in file types which requires unique handling. Text which cannot be selected by a cursor is not searchable by a computer until it's converted to recognized characters via the Optical Character Recognition (OCR) process. When ink-on-paper records are scanned into a computer (with a scanner or camera), any text contained in those records is not searchable by default. Generically, scanner settings include several options, some which merely "take a picture" of the file, and others which process the scan to attempt to recognize letters and words.

Granicus offers an add-on module with OCR that simplifies the optimal processing and searching of documents which are not readily searchable in their native format. This metric shows how many agencies are still working with paper or files which are not readily searchable in their native format.

OCR File Count

Measures complexity scale and diversity as the count of all OCR scanned documents and PDFs processed by the OCR robot.

*OCR Processed Images & PDFs (count) – When adjusted for volume, up 59% since 2018*

ACTIVITIES MARKERS

Average User Interactions (count)

This is counted by unique user IDs assigned to or involved in a request. Nearly every public records request includes the following steps in the process: intake, vet, gather, review, respond, report. If one staff person can accomplish all those activities themselves to complete a request, the request is much simpler than if other people must be brought in to consult, confer, review, comment, redact, or approve a response packet prior to release. The higher the number of records managers, legal staff, and reviewers involved in a request, the more complexity increases. Requests can require interactions from just a single individual up to 8 or more people. Every touchpoint adds a layer of complexity.

User Interactions

Measures connectivity-induced complexity as the average number of staff involved in a request.
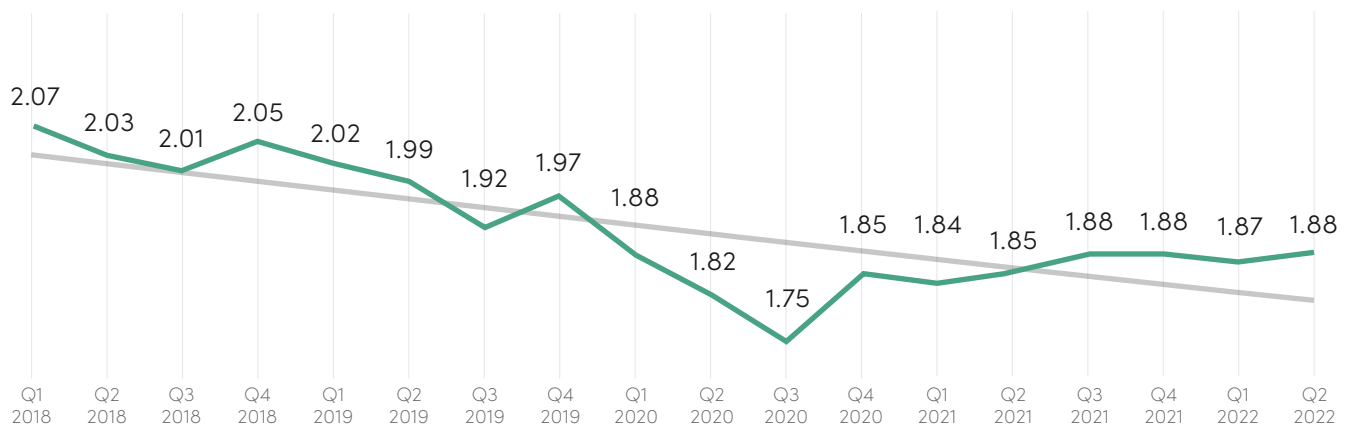
Average User Interactions (count) – When adjusted for volume, down 48% since 2018

Clarification Emails Generated (Count)

As the public becomes more aware of the availability and usefulness of public records requests, new requesters are entering the system at a higher rate than ever before. New requesters, unfamiliar with the norms of submitting public records requests and perhaps less knowledgeable about what specific records are available, may struggle to submit requests in the most efficient way to allow agencies to respond directly and quickly. And the more unsophisticated or unclear the requests made by the public, media, or other agencies, the more time and effort must go into achieving the clarity necessary to narrow and fulfill requests. Clarification emails can be generated from the GovQA system using templates and merge tags for efficiency; but the added steps of sending a clarification email and awaiting a response can result in a more complex request.

Clarification Emails

Measures complexity as connectivity by counting the number of clarification emails between requesters and those managing requests.
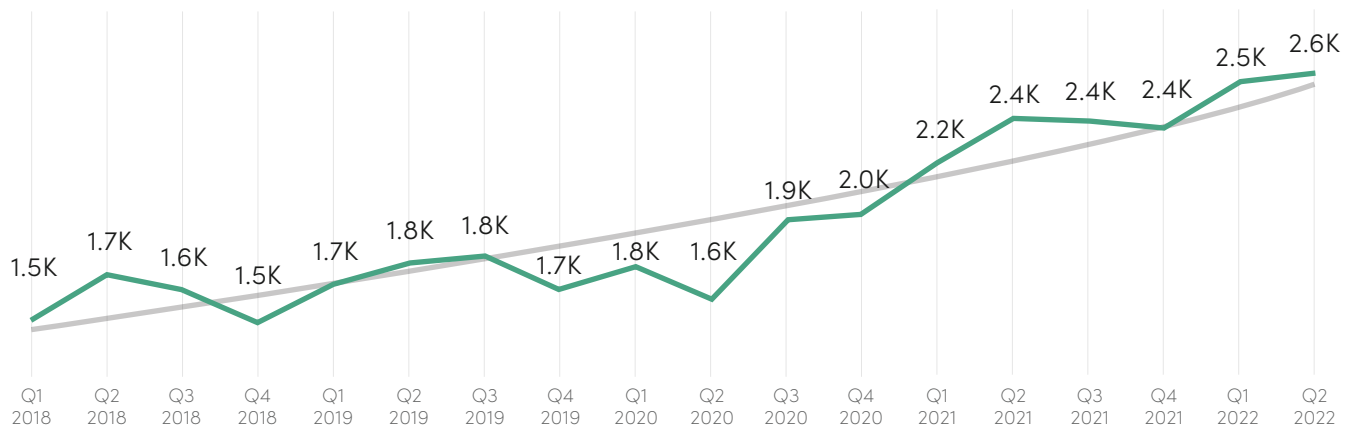

Clarification Emails (count) – Up 70%, but down 2% (essentially flat) when adjusted for volume since 2018

Total Time Spent (Hours)

Like overall request volume, total time spent is an important indicator of complexity for any agency. Many things can affect the amount of time it takes to complete public records requests. As detailed above under other metrics, it takes longer to fulfill a request which is poorly defined in terms of which records are needed (see clarification emails metric). It takes longer to fulfill voluminous requests which require the gathering and processing of dozens, hundreds, or thousands of record files (see quantity of response documents metric). It takes longer to review and redact record files which have many pages or those that are not in simple text format, such as video or OCR scanned files (see file sizes, video and OCR metrics). And it takes longer to involve more than one person in the process — particularly the gathering, reviewing and redacting stages of a request (see average user interactions metric).

Total Time in Hours

Measures the scale and complexity as the number of hours spent processing requests.
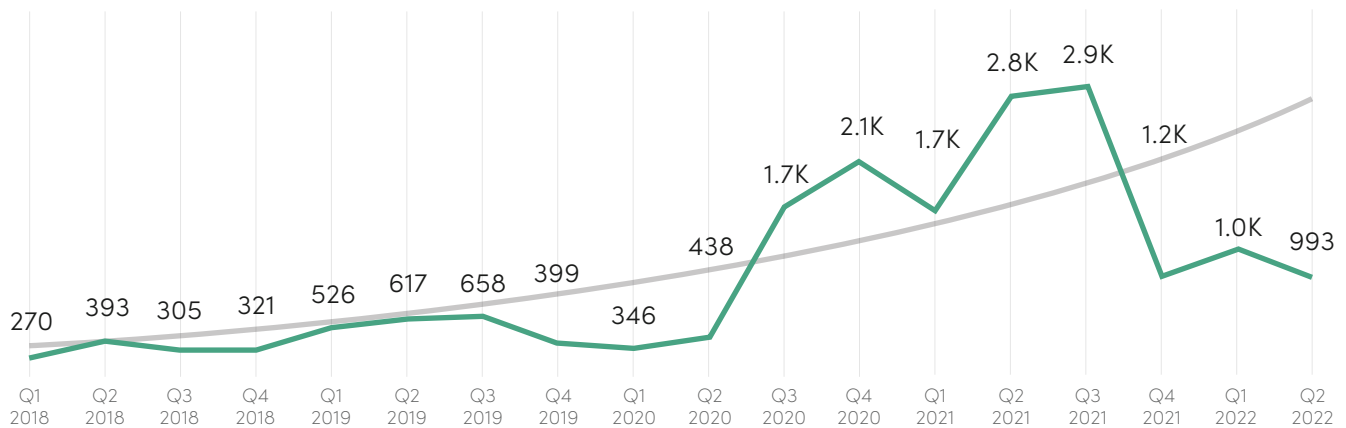
Total Time Spent (hours) – When adjusted for volume, up 112% since 2018

CONCLUSION

Unlock the opportunities of modern government with Granicus

Adopting modern request and information sharing technology is a quick way to address the increasing complexity in the public records space. The right technology can pull your staff out of the current state of overwhelm, boost efficiency, and free up resources that can be redirected towards your most important missions, such as improving customer experiences.

Some of the specific solutions for public records complexity offered by Granicus include:

- **Predictive deflection technologies** that allow requesters to self-serve (bypassing staff involvement and reducing request volume)

- **Optimized intake tools and standardized response templates** that reduce the need for back-and-forth clarification workload

- **AI-enabled video redaction** to process video 90% faster, for time efficiency and risk reduction

- **Bulk actions** to reduce repetitive tasks and help staff manage increases in responsive document size and quantity

- **Automated workflows** that centralize and streamline collaboration reducing total time spent

Public records are a potentially powerful citizen engagement tool for governments — if modern, digital-first technologies are utilized. Increasing transparency and helping constituents stay informed and engaged can build trust and support for your organization's initiatives. Talk to a Granicus public records expert today to learn more.

About Public Records

All 50 states have an open records law based on the Federal "Freedom of Information Act" (FOIA). The laws have slightly different names for each state; but each has requirements to make public records and information available to the public, the media, and other US governments within a certain time frame and each has exemptions for information which must be redacted and not released — such as personal identifiers (SSNs).

About Granicus

Granicus is the leading provider of cloud-based public records automated workflow (SaaS) software for state, county and city governments. Our customers use our software to more easily process and manage public records requests from residents, the media, attorneys, businesses, and other government offices; ensuring secure intake, control, and timely release of responsive records in compliance with the law. 100% government-focused for over 30 years, Granicus has the largest public records customer base in the industry — with 110+ of the top 300 U.S. Cities; 45% of Top U.S. Counties; and 80+ state agencies.

Granicus is here to help

Granicus public records experts are available to walk you through these metrics one-on-one. Discover the ways complexity trends might be affecting your organization's critical missions — and what actions you can take to improve efficiencies and responsiveness with best-in-government automation.

Get in Touch