GRANICUS

2024 Public Record Complexity
BENCHMARK REPORT

Table of Contents

Introduction

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.

This report offers 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 seven years and counting.

The data show that **overall complexity in public records has increased by 56% since Q1 2018.** This increase is a compiled benchmark figure representative of large increases in five of the eight component metrics focused on the records themselves (including factors such as quantity and size of response documents). Request volume is trending up with a large jump of 42 percentage points over 2023. Additionally, we are seeing smaller increases (when adjusted for volume) in two of the three activities markers which represent request clarification workload and total processing time.

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.

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, the industry has relied on annual request volume as an indicator of how challenging the job of public records managers was. But beyond request volume, the industry lacked quantitative data.

Not all records requests are created the same. Easy-to-process requests, such as those for arrest records are often requested alongside more complex requests that require processing of many responsive records and large files (such as video files). Requests may also call for clarification to narrow scope and require several layers of interactions with reviewers, leading to a higher total time spent fulfilling each request.

These circumstances are the metrics uncovered by researching the following data, providing insights into the challenges records managers face.

> **"Dramatic increases in public record complexity can be linked to a number of factors, including new record types like bodycam video; online meeting recordings, transcripts, and in-meeting chats; as well as evolving AI- and chatbot-generated requests. Add external forces like extreme weather, political scrutiny, vexatious requests, and staffing challenges, and it's easy to see why records managers who have yet to begin the process of automating request management are exhausted."** — *Dan Huizinga, Product Manager, Granicus GovQA*

Granicus brings a wealth of experience, dedicated to working closely with the public sector to better inform the research gathered in this report.

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

The Public Records Complexity report quantifies predictable growth (or retraction) in complexity 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.

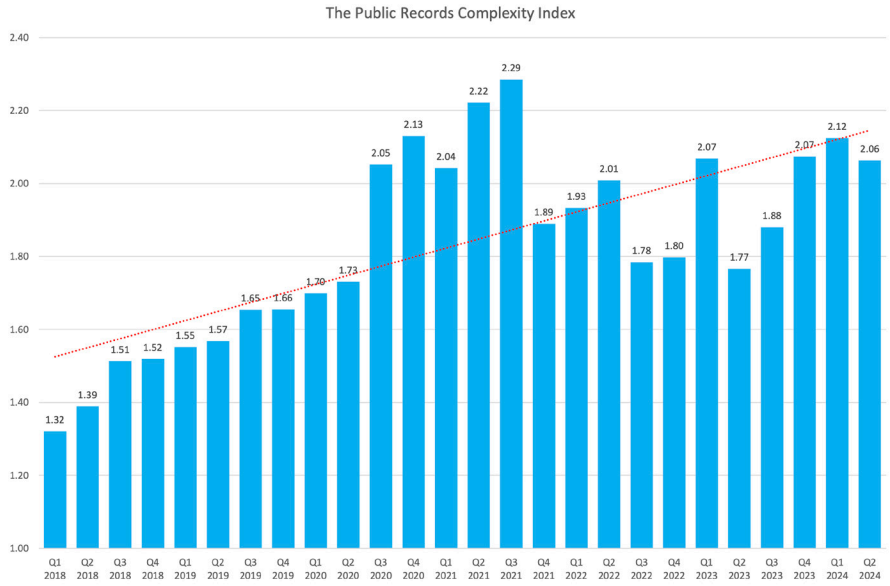
Network of 900+ public records clients

30+ years of experience in the government space

Serving **6,000+ federal, state & local government** around the world

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

Historical Trend: The Public Records Complexity Report — Public Records Complexity Quantified



The Public Records Complexity Index - Up 56% since 2018

About Our Data

The Public Records Complexity Report is composed of two markers: the Records Markers; and the Activities Markers:

Records Markers

The Records Markers are an indicator of the complexity of the individual public record files themselves. These markers include 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 Markers

The Activities Markers are an indicator of user activities related to processing public records requests. Find detailed definitions in the "Metrics Definitions" section below. The Activities Markers include three figures:

Average User Interactions
(indicates connectivity)

Clarification Emails Generated
(indicates connectivity)

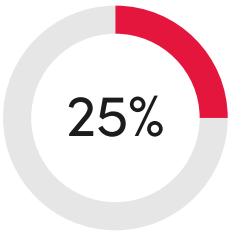
Total Time Spent
(indicates scale)

To calculate the Public Records Complexity Index, the Records and Activities Markers are weighted against Request Volume - which is the total count of public records requests received by an agency.

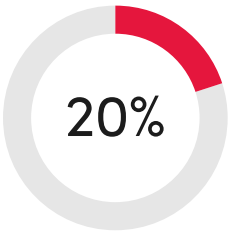
How the Public Records Complexity Report was Created

To calculate complexity, Granicus analyzed blind, anonymized data from almost 500 Public Records Customers. We identified those organizations that fall within a high standard deviation of values within that specific metric. That lead us to approximately 240 member organizations that represent the most common experience across all eight metrics.

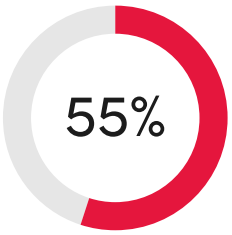
The member agencies include:



State



Counties



Cities

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

Complexity, by definition, is the state of being intricate or complicated - 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 relationships between components)

The Granicus Public Records 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 with regard to budgeting, staffing levels, and technology investments.

Metrics Definitions

Complexity

Complexity, by definition, is the state of being intricate or complicated - having many interconnected parts or features. The causes of complexity are scale (the number of elements in the system), diversity (the extent to which elements are different), and connectivity (the inter-relationships between components).

Drivers of Complexity 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
- AI Powered Requests
- Chatbot Powered Requests
- Drone Footage
- Bodycam Video
- Self-destructing Messages

World changes:

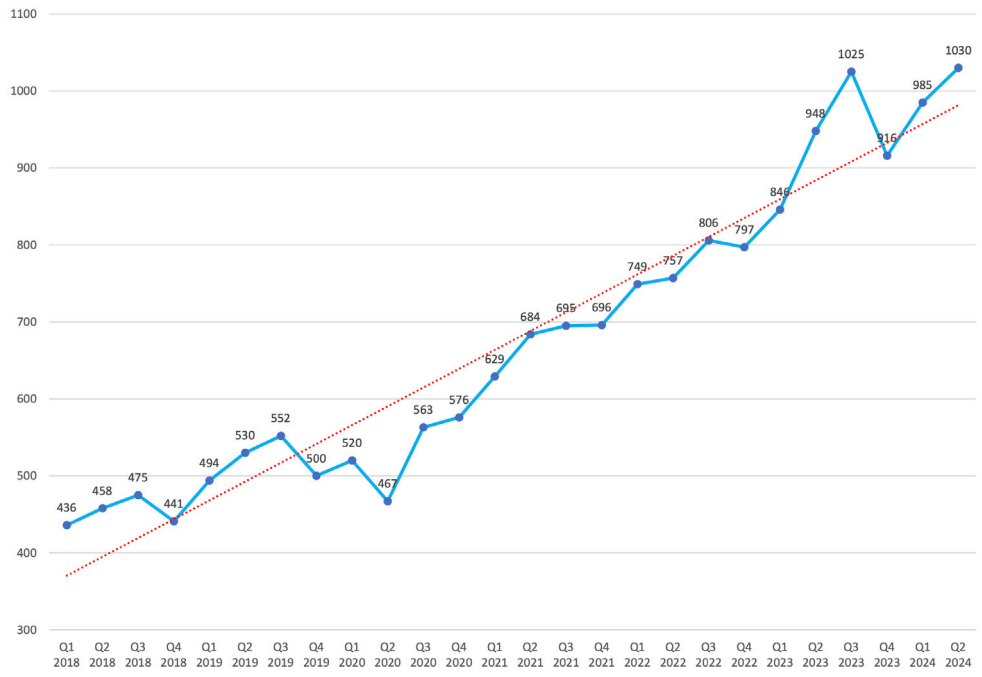
- Pandemic Shift to Remote Work
- Police Reform Movements
- The Great Resignation
- Cyber Attacks
- Extreme Weather Events
- Election Uncertainties

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. A populous state, county, or city agency can have 4,000 to 15,000 or more public records requests submitted each year. A smaller city or county agency might have 100 or fewer public records requests annually. High profile events (such as officer-involved shootings or election uncertainties) 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 citizens, the media, and other agencies strive to understand what transpired and how the event was handled internally by the agency.

Request Volume Average Per Quarter



Request Volume - Up 136% since 2018

Records Markers

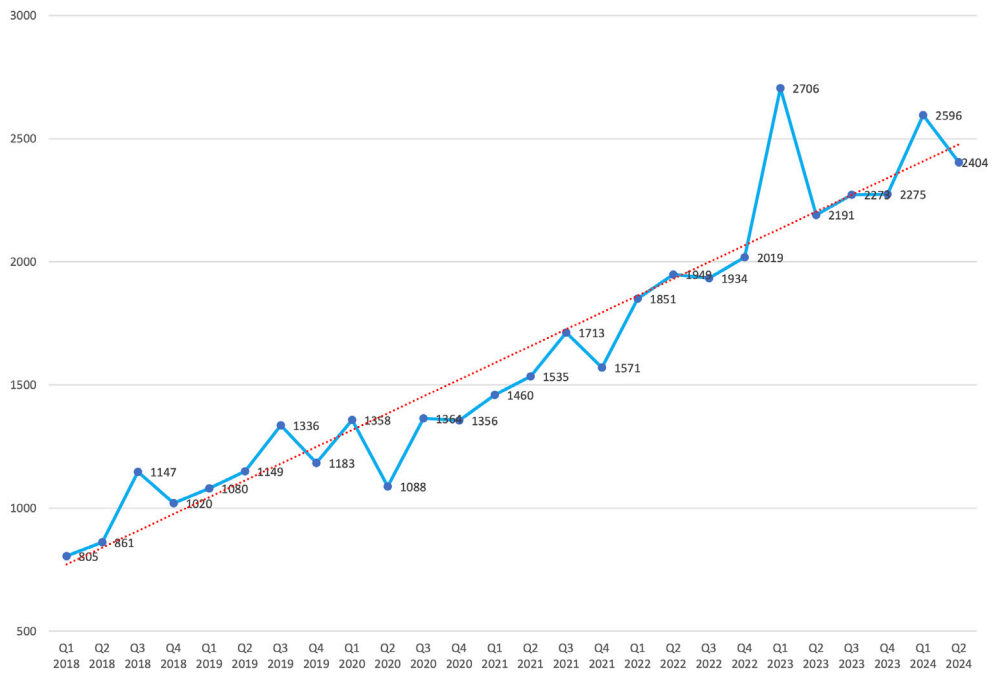
Quantity of Response Documents (Count)

The quantity of response documents metric is a count of individual documents provided to requesters, averaged by volume.

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, at the very least, be uploaded to the request management system. A key step in processing public records is review prior to release, wherein each document must be opened, read, and possibly redacted prior to release.

By this definition, the more documents in the system, the more complex or numerous the actions needed to complete processing.

Quantity of Response Documents



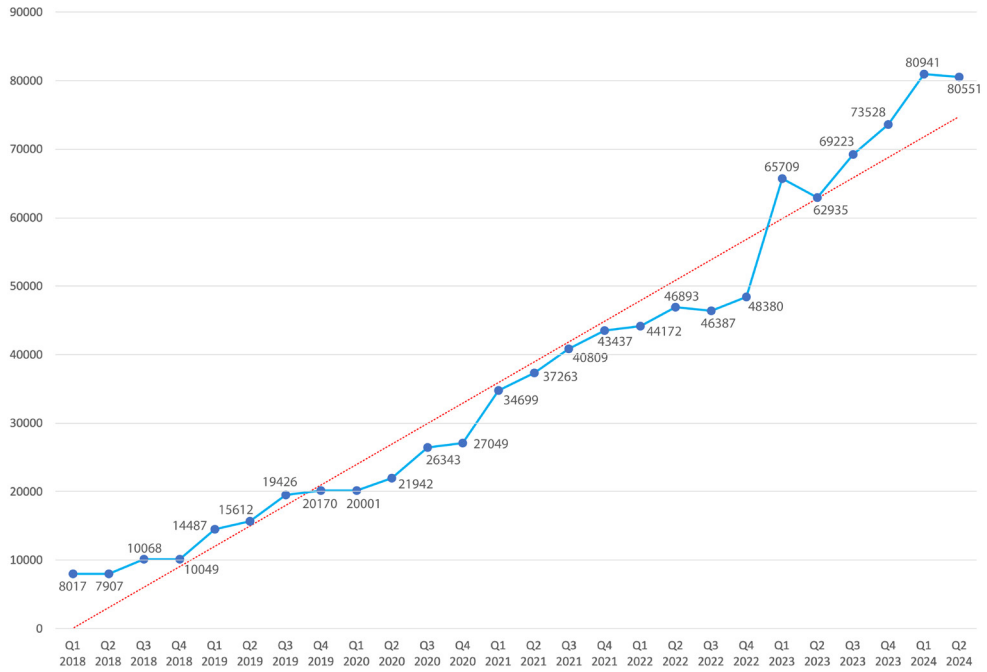
Quantity of Response Documents (count) - Up 179% since 2018

File Size of Response Documents (MB)

Measures the scale of complexity as the total size, in Megabytes, of all documents sent to requesters.

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 or attachments, such as images, audio or video data, that create redaction challenges and increase the amount of time to manage and process within an agency's public records processing system.

File Size of Response Documents



File Size of Response Documents (MB) - Up 325% since 2018

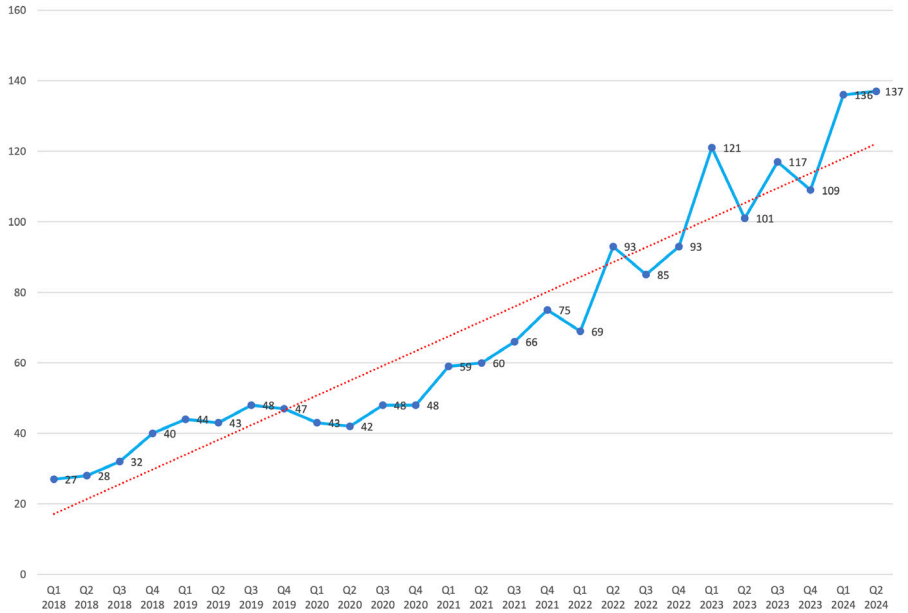
Video Files (Count)

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

For those agencies that manage them, video files present unique challenges. 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). Video files 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. Whether using sophisticated AI tools (such as those available from Granicus in partnership with with Veritone (VERI), 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



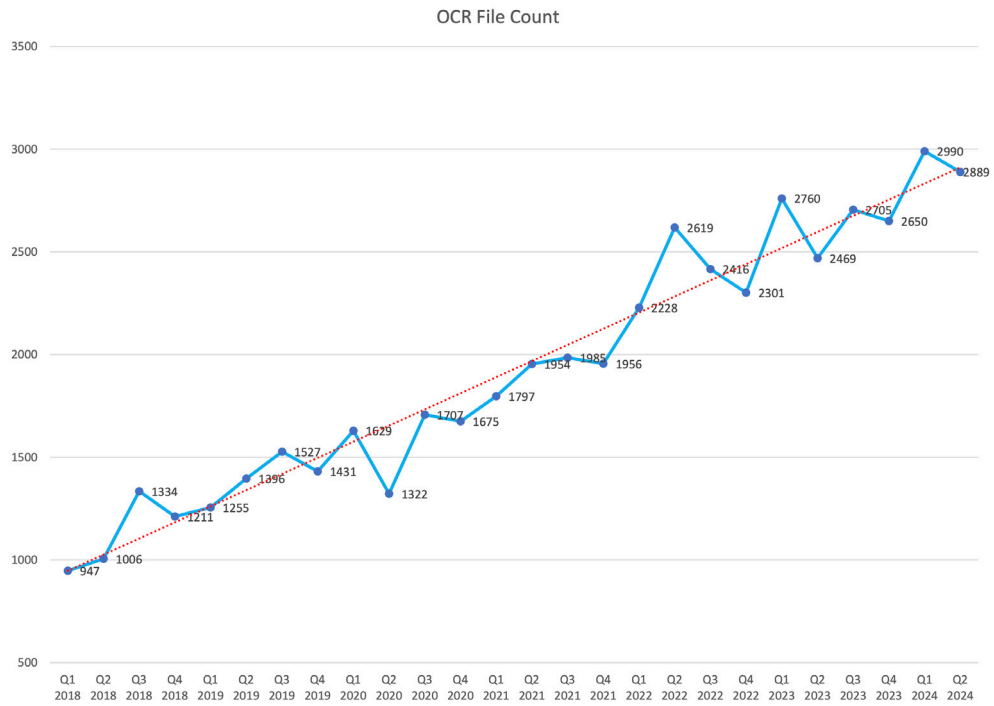
Video Files (count) - Up 115% since 2018

OCR Processed Images and PDFs (Count)

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

For those agencies that manage them, these file types introduce the need for unique handling. Text which cannot be selected by a cursor is not searchable by a computer until 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. 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



OCR Processed Images & PDFs (count) - Up 29% since 2018

Learn more about OCR here: granicus.com/wp-content/uploads/Infographic-OCR-Explained-GovQA.pdf

Activities Markers

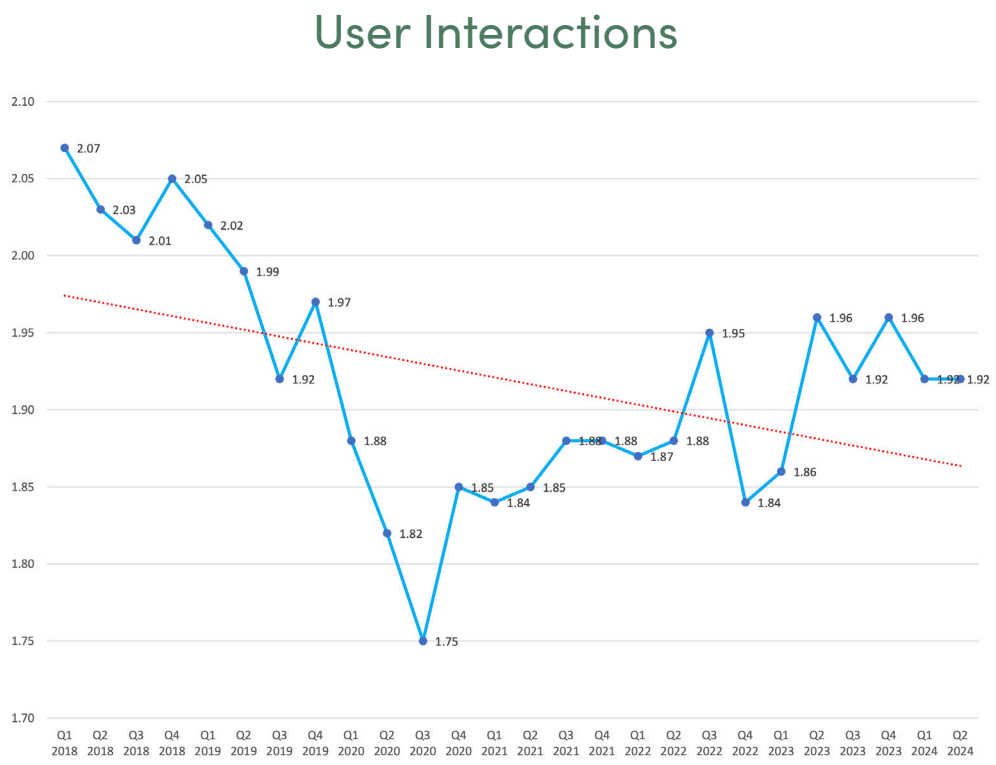
Average User Interactions (Count)

Measures connectivity-induced complexity as the average number of staff involved in a request.

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 member 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 eight or more people. Every touchpoint adds a layer of complexity.

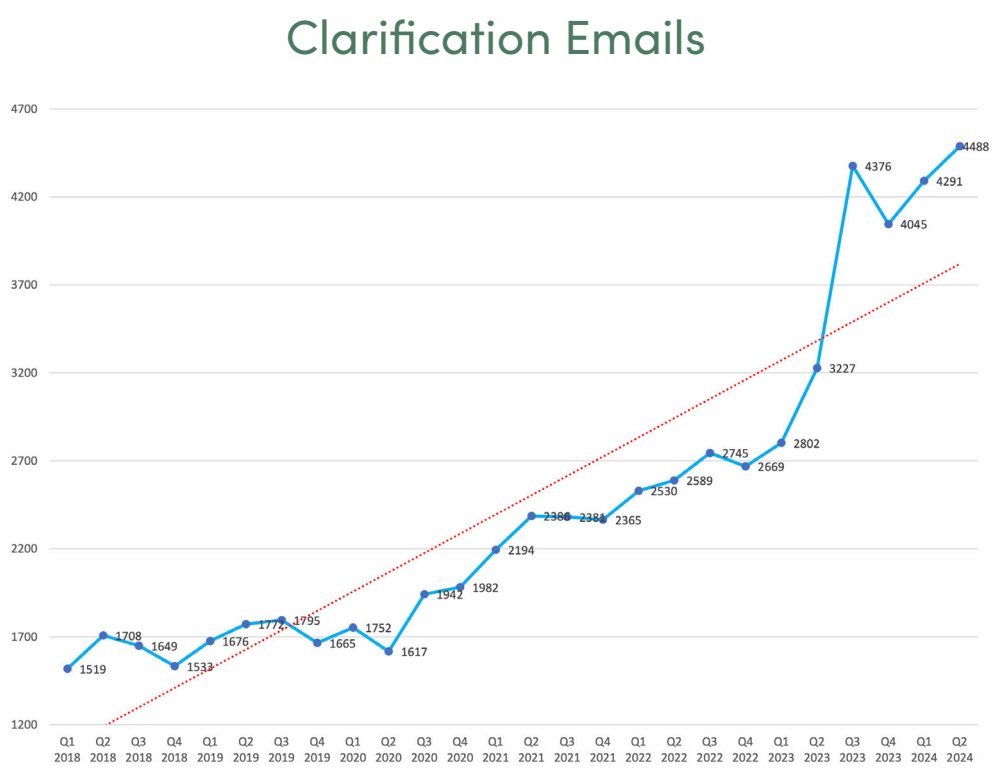


Average User Interactions (count) - Down 61% since 2018

Clarification Emails Generated (Count)

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

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 a way efficient enough for direct and quick agency response. The more unsophisticated or unclear the requests made by the public, media, or other agencies, the more time and effort needed to clarify, narrow, and fulfill requests. Clarification emails can be generated from the Granicus public records request management 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 (count) - Up 194% since 2018

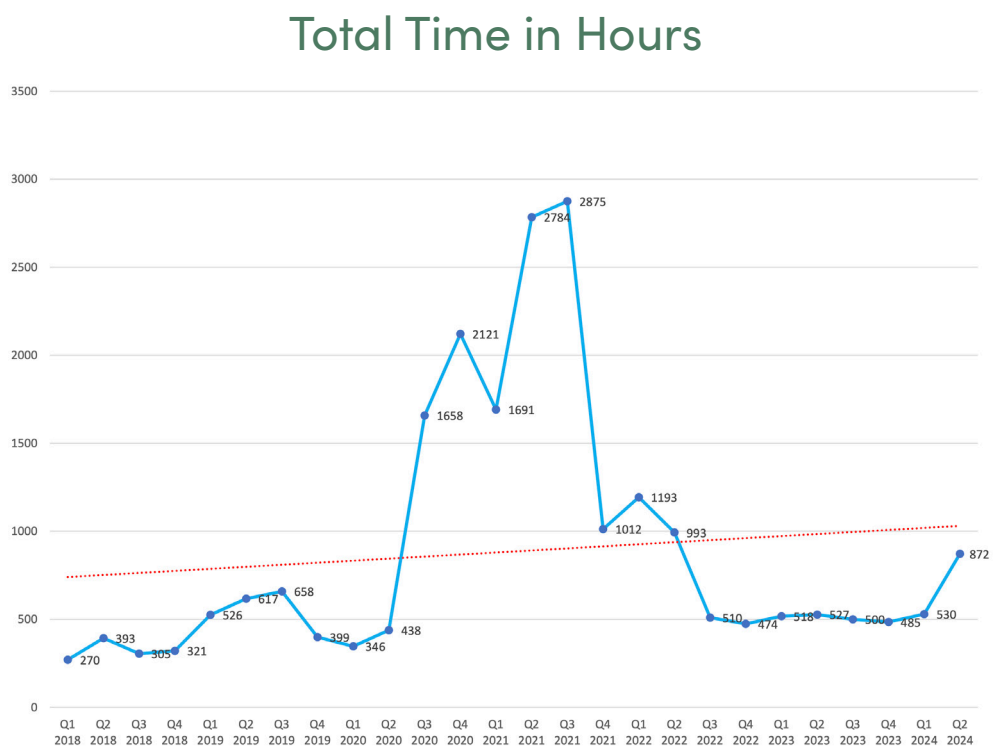
Total Time Spent (Hours)

Measures the scale of complexity as the number of hours spent processing requests.

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:

- **Poorly defining the terms of which records are needed** can delay request fulfillment (see "Clarification Emails" metric).
- **It can take 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 can take 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).
- **Finally, it can take longer to involve more than one person in the process**, particularly during the gathering, reviewing, and redacting stages of a request (see "Average User Interactions" metric).

As reflected by the Q1 2023 Benchmark numbers, however, these complicating factors can be impacted by the use of time-saving tools.



Total Time Spent (hours) - Up 37% since 2018

Conclusion

Modern government can unlock new opportunities

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 staff out of a state of overwhelm, boost efficiency, and free up resources that can be redirected towards an organization's most important missions, such as improving customer experiences. Some tools that technology, such as the Granicus GovQA solution, provide 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
- **"Any and all" email request processing automation tools** which convert pst files containing hundreds or thousands of email messages into de-duped, readable, redactable files
- **Automatic large file optimization** that reduces staff wait times and allows records managers to continue working while processing happens in the background

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 an organization's initiatives.

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. Each has requirements to make public records and information available to the public, the media, and businesses within a certain time frame. 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