CASE STUDY 048

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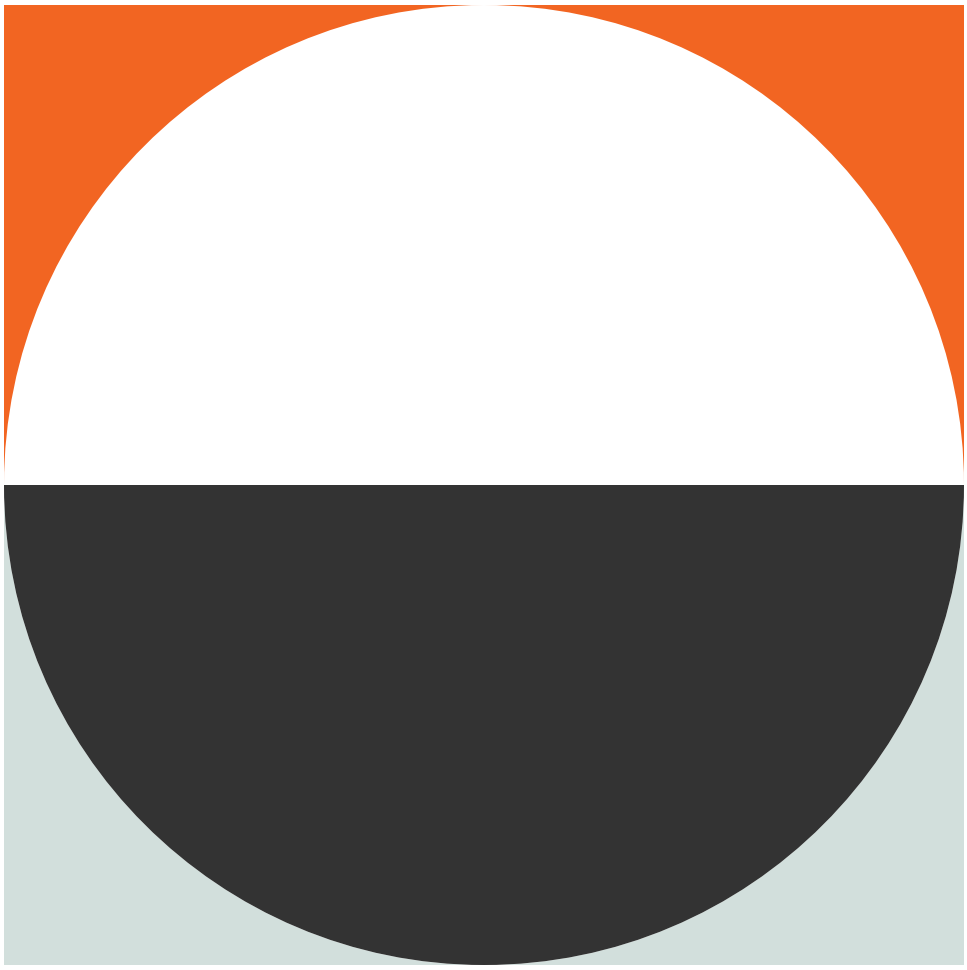
Massive Data Reduction in Internal Review Project



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University Cuts Down Data Project by 97%

University Finds a Solution in Legal Software for Data Reduction and Review

QUICK SUMMARY

Augusta University faced a data review project involving over 72 terabytes of data from 300+ sources, including emails, computers, servers, and USB drives. Traditional methods were slow, labor-intensive, and ineffective for such large-scale data, so they turned to an alternative solution: Nextpoint legal software.

With immense processing power, stringent security measures and cost-effective pricing, Nextpoint software proved to be an optimal solution for an institutional data review. The University worked with Nextpoint's expert data team to leverage Nextpoint EDA technology for data processing and culling. They also utilized the Nextpoint review platform for secure, organized data management.

The Nextpoint team reduced data by over 97%, from 72 terabytes to just 2 terabytes, greatly improving the efficiency and relevance of the review. With automated reports, chain-of-custody logs, advanced search and filtering, and more, the Nextpoint platform offered a comprehensive set of tools that empowered the Augusta team to conduct a large-scale review that had once seemed insurmountable.

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In the summer of 2020, Dr. Michael Diamond was preparing to conduct a confidential institutional review of electronic data at Augusta University, where he serves as Sr. Vice President for Research. As his team began to dive into the project, they quickly realized it involved much more digital data than they could efficiently review and analyze. (Several terabytes more, in fact.) So, Dr. Diamond turned to Nextpoint to help his team handle this massive project. Nextpoint jumped at the opportunity to leverage its new EDA technology designed specifically for cases like this.

It may seem unconventional for a university to utilize legal software for an institutional review of records, but the need to securely review large data sets extends beyond the legal field, and Nextpoint's offerings aligned with the goals and needs of the project. Augusta University is a thriving educational institution with multiple locations across the state of Georgia; it comprises 10 colleges that offer 150 areas of study in undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs.

It only makes sense that a widespread assessment at such a multifaceted institution could garner enough data to call for specialized tools – like the technology used to manage data in litigation. In addition, confidentiality and security are crucial in both the education and legal fields, which meant Dr. Diamond trusted that Nextpoint's cloud environment would provide the level of data security his project demanded.

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THE CHALLENGE:

Two key factors shaped the structure of this far-reaching project and the needs of the University.

1. **The main goal:** The Augusta team had to collect, cull, organize, and review a large volume of data from their Microsoft Office 365 environment, as well as numerous documents from multiple computers, servers, and USB thumb drives. The Augusta University team realized they would need a tool that could handle this level of data without slowing down the project.

2. **A meticulous data log:** The University also needed to maintain an intact chain-of-custody record that logged when data was collected, where it was stored, and who touched it along the way.

Before deciding to look for specialized software for the project, the team utilized different methods of collecting and reviewing data, and each proved to be ineffective. For email, the University's IT department was able to access mailboxes at the server level and run searches for specific words and phrases, but that approach quickly became laborious. Next, they tried exporting entire mailboxes so others could load and search through emails using the Microsoft Outlook software. Again, that approach was slow and reviewers had little confidence in the comprehensiveness of the search results.

For personal computers, the IT department had some experience creating forensic images, which were typically created for internal backup and archival purposes. But they had never been engaged in such a large scale project where the images needed to be preserved for an investigation.

These various methods of collecting, organizing, and reviewing data seemed futile as it became apparent that there was more data involved than anyone had imagined – and it just kept growing. The project involved at least 300 data sources, including mailboxes,

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computers, servers, external hard drives, and USB thumb drives. The data was approaching a whopping 72 terabytes of information that needed to be reviewed. The team inevitably realized that they would need help to successfully accomplish the goals of the project.

THE SOLUTION:

The Augusta University team sought a partner that could assist them in collecting, preserving, and reviewing all the necessary sources of data. After vetting multiple potential vendors, the team chose Nextpoint in part because of its reliable and secure software, an expert Services Team, and a solid network of specialized partners.

Another factor in their decision to choose Nextpoint was the pricing model based on the number of users rather than the size of the data. This became a clear and obvious advantage as the data set rapidly grew to dozens of terabytes.

One of the most immediate needs was to obtain forensic images of potentially up to several hundred computers and hard drives. Nextpoint brought in a professional forensics company and frequent partner, 4Discovery. The technician took over a large conference room at the University that became the headquarters for all the collection efforts during the project. The AU team was impressed with the collection process as they observed the forensics professionals document the details of every computer that they worked on and ensure all collected data was stored and preserved properly.

Nextpoint was able to communicate at my level, as well as with the extremely technical individuals on our team.

Meanwhile, as the Augusta team exported mailboxes from Microsoft Office 365 to review in Nextpoint's Litigation suite, they had the sobering realization that a large number of irrelevant communications were included in these exports – and no one needed to waste time looking at those. That's when the "Nextperts" jumped in to collaborate with Dr. Diamond and his team.

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Using their new EDA technology, the Nextpoint team culled the data and organized specific file types into useful groups and categories, which helped the Augusta team begin their review with particular focus. Nextpoint EDA's extensive automated reports enabled the Nextpoint team to identify high-level statistics and file analysis, which helped the AU Team understand the scope of the project at the outset and make informed decisions as it progressed.

Finally, the Augusta team used the Nextpoint Litigation suite to quickly identify file types, cull and filter data, track chain-of-custody, search and tag documents, and export data seamlessly. The IT team appreciated the security assurances provided by the Nextpoint platform, and the review team valued the personalized support from the range of Nextpoint individuals working on the project.

"Nextpoint was able to communicate at my level, as well as with the extremely technical individuals on our team," Dr. Diamond said. It became a collaborative approach, with Nextpoint relying on Augusta University's IT professionals for knowledge about their servers, computers, software, and email, and the Augusta University team explaining their needs and goals for the review. This allowed Nextpoint to provide the University with a viable framework on how to effectively handle large amounts of data and proceed through the necessary review.

THE OUTCOME:

Nextpoint allowed us to have a thorough assessment of the Electronically Stored Information (ESI) data to allow us to identify items of relevance.

Based on several parameters provided by the AU team such as date ranges and specific search terms, the Nextpoint Services Team culled down the overwhelming 72 terabytes of data into a much more manageable 2 terabytes – a reduction of over 97%. As Dr. Diamond put it, "Nextpoint allowed us to have a thorough assessment of the Electronically Stored Information (ESI) data to allow us to identify items of relevance."

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When searching through email files, the review team would begin their investigation with an individual's name or some other known data points, such as an institution name, then narrow down the collection by adding search terms to get smaller and smaller message sets (and attachments) to read through. The AU Team commented that it was easy to filter out specific domains in email messages in the Nextpoint platform so they could quickly put a spotlight on the communications they needed to see. The review team had a higher level of confidence knowing that the messages they were reviewing were more relevant than unselected documents they might have had to wade through. Additionally, the AU Team was able to save search results in a series of folders for easy organization and retrieval of relevant records.

The Augusta University team also reported that the search functions in Nextpoint were incredibly useful since the "search bar" allowed them to build an entire search string in a single location. The Nextpoint Services Team also provided training on searching tips and best practices, and assisted the review team with filtering out domains that were unnecessary or irrelevant.

To Dr. Diamond, the biggest benefit of working with the Nextpoint Services Team and utilizing the Nextpoint platform was simply being able to engage in a thorough assessment of the electronically stored information, which allowed them to accurately and securely identify items of relevance they needed to review.

When we asked Dr. Diamond for advice that he would share with others undertaking a large data-driven project, he emphasized the importance of crafting an institutional plan that involves individuals from various departments at the organization, including research, compliance, IT, legal, police, human resources, and others. Together, these individuals can discuss what needs to be done and ensure there is a comprehensive plan in place to minimize risk.

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Lastly, Dr. Diamond emphasized that any project will take more time and effort to accomplish thoroughly and accurately, which is why it's so beneficial to engage specialists with experience to lead you through the process.

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