a place of mind
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

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TIPS FOR MANAGING EMAIL

This document focuses on managing email as records of the university's activities.[1] Many important university records are stored in individual staff email in-boxes. This siloed approach to email management creates a number of risks for the university and undermines the units' records as a whole. This document aims to highlight best practices for email management with the understanding email must be managed as part of a broader records management effort.

1. Why manage email?

- **Email are university records.** University records documenting actions, transactions or correspondence may be inaccessible or lost if left unmanaged. Email is increasingly used to confirm or document actions and agree contracts. Such email are business records but they are often left in the inbox of the recipient or in a personal folder. This means that email are not accessible to colleagues and could easily be deleted by mistake.

- **Risk reduction**. Retaining records beyond their retention period has two distinct risks.
  - **Privacy breach**. Retaining personal information in one or more inboxes increases the chance that the information will get inadvertently accessed, forwarded or sent.
  - **Onerous FIPPA process**. Retaining records beyond the retention period creates an overly complex and burdensome compliance process.

- **Uncontrolled access and uncontrolled duplication.** The downside to a single-user siloed approach to email management is that users typically share information by sending it to the "need to know" distribution list of their own choosing. Besides being an inherently insecure method of sharing information, the email record is never retained and/or destroyed centrally, according to a retention schedule, but is instead duplicated to the distribution and retained however the individuals see fit.

2. Types of email and how to manage them.

2. Types of email and how to manage them. There is no perfect solution to the problem of managing email, but it helps to understand the main types of email and how they should be handled.

Type 1 – University business records (master copies). These are key email which record contracts and agreements, human resource or other issues around people management, policy decisions, records of expenditure and other important information. This type of email should not be retained within an individual email inbox, but should be moved to an appropriate file (e.g. structured shared drive, print to paper, in your unit's central record-keeping system).

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[1] Much of this document is taken from Guidelines produced from Cumbria University, UK. (accessed 2016-03-07; http://www.cumbria.ac.uk/Public/VCO/Documents/RecordsManagement/ManagingEmail.pdf)

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Type 1a) – Business records (duplicates). There is no need for every member of staff who receives an important e-mail to save it to a file. There should be a shared understanding of who is responsible for retaining records of a particular project or issue, so that staff with duplicate e-mails can confidently delete them.

Type 2 – Short -term reference (transitory). Email which are not business records but are needed for reference. These records should be retained within a folder within your email inbox for a temporary period. When the project or issue has finished, the folder should then be deleted (rough notes, or a working file such as calculations that are needed to complete an official record). Once the official record is produced the rough notes can be destroyed. If in doubt, retain.

Type 3 – Ephemeral email (transitory). Ephemeral email such as an informal conversation, rearranging a meeting, checking something with a colleague etc. should be deleted once no longer needed.

3. Who is responsible for managing email as records?

One person should be responsible for ensuring all records relating to an issue or project are saved in the appropriate file within the record-keeping system. This should be agreed at the beginning of a project, so that other staff can confidently delete all duplicate records.

Examples include: **Student complaint** – the Undergraduate or Graduate Coordinator should ensure a master copy of relevant email records of the complaint are retained. All duplicate copies of email held by other staff should then be destroyed.
Project – The Project Manager should ensure all relevant email relating to the project are retained. All duplicate copies of email held by other staff should then be destroyed.
Committee records – The Secretary and Chair will normally be responsible for ensuring that email relating to the business of a committee is retained. All duplicate copies of email held by other staff should then be destroyed.

4. When should an email be saved as a record?

Email can be saved at a number of different stages depending on the particular issue they relate to. Examples include:

- where the email is obviously significant save it as soon as received or sent
- at the end of a project you could save all significant email and then delete the remainder (or keep for a short period then delete).
- When saving email conversation ‘threads’ either save as soon as it is clear that the conversation is finished, or if this is not clear, save at the point when a definite conclusion or decision has been reached. You only need to save one copy of the full ‘thread’ and not each individual email.

5. How should a shared email inboxes be managed?

When using shared email inboxes (e.g. admissions, IT Service Desk etc.) it is important that the users of the inbox have a shared understanding of how messages will be managed.

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The following areas should be agreed:

- who should answer which messages and how this will be indicated to the team (i.e. colour coding or flagging)?
- how should users indicate that a message has been read or is being progressed?
- who is responsible for capturing any business records contained in the email?
- where will the different types of email be retained if needed for reference?
- how long will messages in the inbox be retained for and who is responsible for this?

6. How should attachments be managed?

There are risks associated with retaining email with their attachments in your mailbox, in particular:

- older versions of documents will be retained in your inbox and may then need to be disclosed to comply with legal obligations, even when they should have been deleted
- attachments will increase the size of your inbox
- retaining duplicate versions of documents within your email can create confusion as to which version is the correct one

Best practices for attachments:

- avoid using attachments where possible – instead **send a link** to a shared folder or to a website/shared drive. This will prevent the multiplication of different versions within email.
- if you do need a record that a document has been sent save the email and attachment together
- follow version control protocols so that it is always clear which version of a document has been circulated and to whom.

7. How long should I retain email?

Email which are being managed as business records should be retained in line with university policy depending on the type of information they contain. If email are saved to the relevant file outside of your inbox then the file should be destroyed in line with the retention period. Email which are not being managed as records should be retained in your email in-box for a temporary period and then deleted once no longer needed. When deleting email remember to regularly empty your deleted items folder.

Key Messages:

- Email must be managed as part of a bigger records management effort
- Name documents and email according to a naming standard
- Apply retention decisions consistently according to university retention schedules
- Seek agreement with your department/unit/team/project on how email and records are going to be retained (i.e., define responsibility for retaining the email, storing the email)
- Structure shared drive so staff can find information easily
- Document your practices and communicate widely
- Call the Records Management Department to assist