



RECORDED
INFORMATION
MANAGEMENT



MANAGING ELECTRONIC MAIL

March 2007

Public Archives and Records Office of PEI

MANAGING ELECTRONIC MAIL

Guidelines for the Government of Prince Edward Island

1. Scope

The application of these guidelines is referenced to section 2.1 of the *Archives & Records Act* and applies to all records in the custody, or under the control of a public body, including court administrative records.

“Public body” means a Government department or a board, commission, committee, office foundation, agency, tribunal, task force, council, association or other body, incorporated or unincorporated, all the members of which, or the members of the board of directors or management of which,

(i) are appointed by order of the Lieutenant Governor in Council, or

(ii) if not so appointed or specified, in the discharge of their duties are public officers or employees of the Government,

(iii) work under contract and the supervision of an officer or employee of the Government,

and includes the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer and a body designated as a public body pursuant to clause 20 (c).

2. Intent and Purpose

The intent of these guidelines is to provide and explain requirements, guidelines and best practices for electronic mail (e-mail) messages that meet the criteria for records as defined by the *Archives & Records Act* of P.E.I. (Cap A-19).

These guidelines have two purposes. First, they are intended to assist government employees to complying with Prince Edward Island public records’ law in their use of e-mail. Second, the guidelines promote best practices and provides suggestions that facilitate the effective capture, management, and retention of electronic messages as public records.

3. Introduction

Electronic mail systems, commonly called e-mail, are becoming the communications method of choice for many public officials and employees in Prince Edward Island. E-mail messages are often used as communication substitutes for telephone messages as well as to communicate substantive information previously committed to paper and transmitted by more traditional methods. This combination of communication and record creation/ keeping has created ambiguities on the status of e-mail messages as records.

The management of e-mail systems touches on nearly all functions for which a government department is dependent on record keeping: privacy, administration, vital records management, administrative security, audits, accessibility, and archival storage. The importance of managing e-mail messages and systems properly is the same as for other records keeping systems -- to ensure compliance with Prince Edward Island laws concerning the creation of, retention of, and access to public records.

Government departments that use electronic mail have an obligation to make employees aware that e-mail messages, like paper records, must be retained and destroyed according to established recorded information management procedures.

4. Definitions

“E-mail systems” are store-and-deliver software systems that transport messages from one computer user to another. E-mail systems range in scope and size from a local area network that shuffles messages to users within a department or office, to a wide area network e-mail system which carries messages to users in multiple locations, to Internet e-mail that has a national and international range.

“E-mail messages” are electronic documents created and sent or received by a computer system. This definition applies equally to the contents of the communication, the transactional information, and any attachments associated with such communication. Thus, e-mail messages are similar to other forms of communicated messages, such as correspondence, memoranda, and circular letters.

E-mail system backups are backups that are run on a nightly basis for disaster recovery purposes only. These backups provide a recovery mechanism for the complete recovery of the e-mail system in the unlikely circumstance that a catastrophic event occurs to the system. Unlike file server backups, which provide disaster recovery protection as well as the ability to recover individual files, individual e-mail messages are not recoverable.

5. Legal Requirements

The *Archives & Records Act* (Cap A-19) defines:

"Records" include any correspondence, memorandum, book plan, map, drawings, diagram, pictorial or graphic work, photographs, film, microform, sound recording, video tape, electronic data, machine readable record, and any other documentary material, regardless of physical form, characteristics or media on which it is stored and any copy thereof"

Clearly, an e-mail message is a document or item created or received by a public office. Whether the e-mail serves to document the organization, functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations or other activities are the deciding factor as to its status as a record. This is true of any communication, whether electronic or paper.

E-mail messages that meet the criteria of the definition of a record must be scheduled and retained for the appropriate time period before disposition.

6. Retention and Scheduling Requirements

The Archives Act defines the procedures and authority to be used to establish the retention and disposition of records.

"Records retention and disposition schedules" means a comprehensive description and classification of all records of a public body with a plan governing the life cycle of the records from creation or receipt to disposition or permanent preservation.

"All records retention and disposition schedules are subject to the approval of the **Public Records Committee.**"

The Archives & Records Act stipulates that records of the provincial government cannot be destroyed or permanently removed from government custody without the development of records retention and disposition schedules or a one-time destruction order, approved in writing by the Public Records Committee.

E-mail itself is not considered a record series or category. It is a means of transmission of messages or information. Like paper or microfilm, e-mail is the medium by which this type of record is transmitted. Just as a department cannot schedule all paper or microfilm records together under a single retention period, a department cannot simply schedule e-mail as a record series. Rather, retention or disposition of e-mail messages must be related to the information they contain or the purpose they serve. The content, transactional information, and any attachments associated with the message are considered a record (if they meet the Archives Act criteria). The content of e-mail messages may vary considerably, and therefore, this content must be evaluated to determine the length of time the message must be retained.

Simply backing up the e-mail system onto tapes or other media or purging all messages after a set amount of time is not an appropriate strategy for managing e-mail.

In requiring that records not be destroyed without proper authority, the legislation recognizes that those who work and make decisions in the public interest must be accountable for their actions and decisions. The saving of records is an essential component of accountability.

A policy on retaining official records of the Government of Prince Edward Island has been adopted and is found in Treasury Board Manual, Section 5, "Recorded Information Management Policy". This policy provides advice on how official records, including electronic records, should be maintained, controlled, and described in a way that allows them to be efficiently accessed, retrieved and interpreted. The Policy states that Senior Records Managers and Records Management Liaison Officers are responsible and accountable for the records in their care.

Guidelines and Best Practices for Managing E-mail

1. Which e-mail messages are records?

Some examples of e-mail messages that are usually considered records would include:

- policies and directives
- correspondence and memoranda related to official business
- work schedules and assignments
- drafts of documents that are circulated for comments or approval
- documents that initiate, authorize or complete a business transaction
- agenda and minutes of meetings
- final reports and recommendations

2. Which e-mail messages are not considered records?

Some examples of messages that would not be considered records include:

- phone message slips transmitted through e-mail
- copies or extracts of documents distributed solely for convenience of reference
- personal messages and announcements not related to the department's business
- announcements of social events
- copies of announcements, policies etc. distributed as information to a large number of people. **i.e.**, A smoking policy is not treated as a record by everyone who receives it. The originating office must keep the record.
- messages received from listservers or other Internet sources for information purposes only.

3. What are the storage options?

There are three options for filing and retaining e-mail messages. They are:

- file within existing e-mail system
- design and maintain an electronic document management system
- print to paper and store the paper in the existing manual file system

Each of these methods have their strengths and weaknesses. For reasons discussed below, the recommended method is the design and maintenance of an electronic document management system. In all these scenarios it is important to incorporate metadata considerations into your storage decision. **(In this context metadata refers to information such as sender, recipient, date, routing, subject lines, system information and manuals, etc.)**

A. File within existing e-mail system: - On-line Storage

On-line storage maintains the full functionality of the e-mail message, and allows users to recall the message at any time for reference or responding. **A disadvantage of on-line storage is the potential costs and effects of storage on the performance of the e-mail system.** This is the least attractive of all the options. Current e-mail software in the Government of Prince Edward Island does not act as a record keeping system.

B. Electronic Document Management System - Near-line Storage

Near-line storage is defined as storage of e-mail messages, metadata, and attachments **in an electronic record keeping system.** This type of storage requires that the message, metadata, and attachments be removed from the on-line e-mail system and stored in an electronic format. For example, a message stored in an on-line e-mail system can be saved to a file on a local hard drive. The file should be stored in a format that is compatible with department operations, and filed according to filing practices established by the department and/or user.

Near-line storage allows the user to maintain a moderate amount of functionality, in that e-mail messages stored near-line can be retrieved and referenced electronically. In storing e-mail messages, metadata, and attachments, users should be careful to maintain a filing system which is consistent with established practices. This includes filing sequences as well as the use of naming conventions for computer files. In addition, users may want to consider "protecting" such records from alteration.

C. Print to paper system - Off-line storage

Off-line storage is defined as the storage of e-mail messages, metadata, and attachments outside of an electronic record-keeping environment. The clearest example of this type of storage is to **simply print out an e-mail message to paper**, with its contextual information and attachments in place, for filing within existing filing systems in the department. Although this is not a long term solution, it may be necessary until the retention capabilities of information technologies have been further developed. Off-line storage dramatically reduces the functionality, in that e-mail messages are no longer searchable or retrievable in electronic form. However, off-line storage offers users the ability to integrate the filing of records in e-mail systems within existing hard-copy filing systems in departments. Any e-mail messages, metadata, and attachments stored off-line should be done in a manner consistent with department practice.

Off line Storage - Basic principles:

- 1. If the e-mail message is a record - print it and file the printed copy like any other record, then you may delete the e-mail**
- 2. If the e-mail message is not a record - delete it as soon as you have finished using it. If you want to keep it for information, print it or save it on your hard-drive and delete the e-mail version**

When you receive a record by e-mail

Print it and file it in the departmental filing system the same way you would file a paper document on the same subject. Even when you plan to edit the record and return it by e-mail, print out the version you receive. It is necessary to preserve each stage of the transaction and until an electronic system is developed, filing a paper copy is the most reliable method.

When you send a record by e-mail

If you only send records by e-mail occasionally, just send yourself a blind copy (by putting your own name in the BC box) and then print the message when you get it back. This way, all the transmission information about time, dates etc., which is part of the record, is preserved. If you just printed the message before you sent it, you would lose that information.

If you send a lot of records by e-mail, use the following procedure once a day.

1. From the main e-mail menu double click on **Out Box** to bring up a list of all messages sent that day.
2. Hold down the control key and highlight the messages you want by clicking on them.
3. Select the **File** option from the heading line of the outbox screen.
4. Select **Print** from the pop-up box that appears. Another pop-up box will appear containing all the candidates for printing.
5. To print all the messages in the last box plus the attachments, hold down the shift key and click on the first and last items in the list. All the items will be highlighted. Select **Print** and they will all print.

Employees should be responsible for classifying messages they send or receive according to content, the department's folder/directory structure and established records series.

4. What about record copies?

E-mail users should be aware that e-mail messages are often widely distributed. Determining which individual maintains the record copy of the message, i.e. the original message that must be retained per the retention schedule, is vital to e-mail management. If the holder of the record copy is not identified and aware of his/her responsibility, the department may find that no one retains the message or that everyone retains the message. Neither of these scenarios is appropriate.

For example, government policy documents which are transmitted to multiple recipients via an e-mail system need not be maintained by each recipient beyond his or her need for this information if record copy responsibility is established so that the record is maintained by some office or agent for its established retention period. In this example, a logical record copy responsibility rests with the creator of the policy document. Prompt deletion of duplicate copies of e-mail messages from an e-mail system makes the system whole much easier to manage and reduces disk space consumed by redundant information.

Generally speaking, the individual who sends an e-mail message should maintain the record copy of the message. However, the varied uses and wide distribution of e-mail may result in many exceptions to this rule that will have to be dealt with internally.

5. What about Distribution Lists?

If you send to a "distribution list" (not a listserver, but a specified list of individuals), you must also keep a copy of the members of that list for as long as you are required to keep the message itself. It is of little value to know that the "Security Alert!" notice went to "Swat Team 7," without knowing whether Arnold S. received the message. Nicknames present a similar problem.

6. What about Subject Lines?

Fill in the subject line on your e-mail both to help your recipient identify and file messages, and to help you file your OUT box messages that must be retained for some period. Subject lines should be as descriptive as possible.

The following are some examples of poor and good subject lines for the same message.

Poor or confusing subject lines

"helpful info"
 "report"
 "minutes"
 "important"
 "today?"
 "news"

Better, descriptive subject lines

"contact info"
 "Quarterly financial report"
 "Jan 99 board minutes"
 "revised admin. procedures"
 "lunch plans today?"
 "new department head appointed"

7. What about Access?

A major challenge for department records management liaison officers is to guarantee that records maintained in electronic information systems are accessible and usable for the entire length of the retention period. Rapid changes and enhancements to both hardware and software compound this challenge. As many e-mail systems have limitations in storage space that cause operational problems when messages are stored in the system beyond a specific period (such as sixty or ninety days), procedures must be in place to transfer records from the e-mail system to another electronic record keeping system to meet retention requirements.

Messages should be maintained in a format that preserves contextual information (metadata) and that facilitates retrieval and access.

The system should allow deletion of messages once their retention periods expire.

Beyond this generic challenge of technological change, there are more mundane, but equally critical steps that must be in place to ensure that records created by e-mail systems can be located and retrieved when required. A central step is a system of standardized naming conventions and filing rules within the e-mail systems.

E-mail messages should be indexed in an organized and consistent pattern reflecting the ways in which records are used and referenced. Records maintained electronically, including e-mail messages, have an advantage over conventional "hard copy" document filing systems in that indexing for multiple access points is relatively simple and inexpensive, provided an effective indexing framework is in place. Planning records indexing and retrieval points is time well spent. Unnecessary time needed to retrieve electronic records is not productive staff time, and is an annoyance to the public as well.

Messages should be stored in a logical filing system that is searchable by multiple data elements.

8. What about Responsibility?

Roles and responsibilities of department personnel should be clearly defined. Employees must understand and carry out their role in records management and departments must ensure compliance with government procedures and P.E.I. law. Unauthorized users should not be able to access, modify, destroy or distribute records.

Department administrators, individual employees, records managers, information technology (IT) managers and server administrators share responsibility for managing electronic records. Departments should clearly identify the roles of each, adopt procedures, train staff and monitor compliance on a regular basis. The creator or recipient should make decisions regarding messages. The department should take appropriate measures to preserve data integrity, confidentiality and physical security of e-mail records.

Summary

For more information on recorded information management, contact your department's Records Management Liaison Officer, the Provincial Records Manager or the Public Archives & Records Office.

Records Management Liaison Officer		Department
Doyle, Janet	368-4837	Agriculture/ Fisheries, Aquaculture & Rural Dev.
MacLeod, Carol	368-4520	Auditor General's Office
Thompson, Donna	368-5270	Communities, Cultural Affairs & Labour
Eldershaw, Leah	368-5876	Innovation & Advanced Learning
MacGillivray, Diana	368-4687	Education & Childhood Dev.
Long, Rose	368-4301	Executive Council
Spence, Kelli	368-5320	Environment, Energy & Forestry
Wright, Pamela	620-3347	Health
Connolly, Ellen	368-4851	Office of Attorney General
Littlewood, Laura	620-3458	OAG - Supreme Court
Murnaghan, Tammy	620-3534	Social Services & Seniors
Smith, Diane	368-4201	Provincial Treasury
MacDonald, Connie	368-5493	PT-Taxation & Property
Montgomery, Debbie	836-3605	PEI Grain Elevators Corp.
McGarry, Janet	368-4206	Public Service Commission
Cotton, Vicki	368-6628	Tourism/Communications PEI
Belaire, Betty	368-7775	Transportation & Public Works
Power, Chris	368-4091	Worker's Comp. Board

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