Records Management Guidance: Basic Guide to Managing Emails

This guidance is designed to give staff some basic tips to help organise and arrange emails.

INTRODUCTION

A common question asked of Records Management staff is '**how long should emails be kept**?' Unfortunately, the answer is not simple; good practice requires a change in how emails are regarded by staff.

Organisations and individuals need to keep information to provide evidence of transactions or decisions, to meet legal obligations and to support day-to-day business activity. The retention, disposal and management of some information is covered by legislation, for example, many financial records have to be kept for 7 years. To find out how long certain records need to be retained, please see the retention schedules for the University.

Modern working practices mean that **vital information and records of important decisions or correspondence can be contained in emails**. However, staff frequently view them as 'emails', rather than records that have evidential and business value. Good records management recognises that the format of the record is unimportant and **it is the content of the email that should be assessed** when making decisions about retention or disposal.

It is not practical or efficient to retain all emails in case some contain information of value. Staff should set up procedures to manage their emails to make sure that **those without value can be deleted and those with value are retained**. For many people, the majority of emails will be of low significance, often trivial messages, that have a very short period of relevance. Due to the large numbers of emails received, their management is often regarded as onerous and time-consuming. It is, however, necessary if organisations are to ensure they have the information they need.

The following guidelines suggest a few ways that emails can be managed and will hopefully make life easier for staff. They should also help to avoid the loss of vital information due to deletion or the inability to locate a particular email. It is important to remember that you should use your university email when sending and receiving work emails, and that work emails do not belong to you as an individual but are university documents.

GENERAL HOUSEKEEPING

1. **Acknowledge the importance of managing emails correctly**

    Allocate a small amount of time daily or weekly to deal with your inbox. This takes self-discipline! You also need to set aside time to manage folders other than your inbox such as your Sent Items folder.

2. **Commit to tackling your backlog gradually**

If there are a large number of emails in your inbox going back over a considerable period of time, set aside some time on a regular basis to go through them and delete the ones that are no longer of importance. This is a tedious task but it is important.

3. **Identify and flag on receipt**

The majority of emails will have limited use and do not have to be kept for long. Those that do have value should be identified immediately and flagged or moved into sub-folders.

SENDING AND RECEIVING EMAILS

1. **Aim to send separate emails for different topics**
    If various subjects are covered in one email, it will be harder to file and will also contain irrelevant information.

2. **Develop an email naming protocol**

    Email subject headings should accurately reflect their content. Clear and unambiguous subject headings will allow you or your colleagues to quickly identify relevant information. This might mean you need to update the subject part way through an email chain. It often does not occur to people that they can or should re-name emails but this is a simple way of improving their management. Examples:

    Team Meeting actions 03/09/2022 <u>rather than</u> *Actions from last meeting!*
    Request for advice re Rocket Project <u>rather than</u> *Help needed….*

3. **Try not to send attachments**

    An email with a link to a shared area will prevent unnecessary transmission of large attachments to one or more people.

FILING AND DELETING EMAILS

1. **Create sub-folders within your inbox with recognisable names.** Move emails (both received and sent) into these sub-folders on a regular basis, preferably immediately on receipt. This will improve the look of your inbox and will help you to find information about a particular topic. It can be helpful to create a 'Reference' or 'To read' sub-folder in your inbox. Emails that have information of interest or links that you want or need to read at some point can be put in one place. This will remove them from your inbox and avoid them being forgotten about if you don't get round to reading them immediately.

2. **Ensure that important emails are retained and accessible to others**

When relevant, save important emails so that they are accessible to other people (e.g. on a shared drive/space or a shared email account) as soon as they are sent or received. This will ensure that they are retained along with other relevant information. If important records are only kept in personal inboxes, they will be inaccessible or lost when members of staff are out of the office or cease to work for the university. Reveal any "hidden" header information before saving the e-mail and ensure that you save the full header information whenever possible. Save any attachments as separate documents from emails and make sure that the file name refers to the email. If the attachment is important and the email does not provide any necessary context, you can just save the attachment.

3. Deletion means deletion

It is important to check that deleted emails are actually deleted and not simply moved to the Deleted Items folder. Remember to delete emails in the Sent Items and Junk Email folders as well.

Examples of emails to retain

1. The information is needed to carry out business activities, such as day-to-day administrative records.

2. There is a legal requirement to keep the information, eg financial records.

3. The email contributes to an understanding of how a decision was reached.

4. Information supporting policies or decisions, or providing evidence that certain actions were taken, or advice/instructions given.

5. The information in the email may help staff deal with similar situations in the future, eg information that shows what procedure was followed in a particular situation.

6. The information has value for historical research purposes.

Examples of emails to delete

For most staff, many emails they receive will not need to be kept for long. Examples of messages that can be quickly deleted include: -

1. Emails about the arrangement for a meeting or the change of venue.

2. Thank you's or acknowledgements.

3. Social interactions.

4. Messages from subscribed lists.

5. Out of Office automatic replies.

6. 'All user' emails.

7. Junk emails.

8. Details about travel arrangements.

9. Emails where you were cc'd for information only, assuming that the sender or main recipient will capture the message.

The [retention schedules](#) provide detailed guidance on how long certain records need to be retained. If you have any questions about retention schedules or email management, you can contact the Records Management Team at records@uwtsd.ac.uk