InterPARES 3 Project

International Research on Permanent Authentic Records in Electronic Systems

Title:	Case Study 08 – North Vancouver Museum and Archives (NVMA): Customizable Versions of Products Brochure 3. Managing E-mail
Status:	Final (public)
Version:	1.0
Last Revised:	October 2010
Author:	The InterPARES 3 Project, TEAM Canada
Writer(s):	Cindy McLellan School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, The University of British Columbia Shamin Malmas School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, The University of British Columbia
Project Component:	Knowledge Mobilization
URL:	http://www.interpares.org/display_file.cfm?doc= ip3_canada_cs08_brochure-3.pdf

Document Control

Version history			
Version	Date	By	Version notes
1.0	2010-10-15	C. McLellan, S. Malmas	First public version.

Managing E-mail

Many factors have contributed to e-mail becoming a key issue in business environments. The vast bulk of e-mails arriving in inboxes is an overwhelming reality for everyone. In many cases, e-mail has replaced traditional letter writing and increasingly contains records important to business functions. Binding contracts are created within e-mail threads and recorded nowhere else. In addition, the nature of e-mail has blurred the boundaries between private correspondence and business records. Developing criteria for handling, keeping and maintaining e-mail over time will ensure that important records can be efficiently retrieved and ephemera minimized.

These guidelines have been developed to help businesses and volunteer organizations understand and preserve their e-mail records. A proper records management plan includes making considerations for e-mail; every organization needs to have a policy regarding the retention and disposition of e-mail. This guide, while not comprehensive, offers practical advice and tips from the experts that can be applied with minimal resources.

There are four broad types of e-mail:
1. **Executive or decision-making e-mails:** Since there is an expectation of action related to these e-mails, they should be retained for a minimum of five years, unless you are legally required to keep them longer. Please note that some records may have long-term value and should be retained permanently.
2. **Routine administrative e-mails:** These e-mails should be retained for a minimum of one year, unless you are legally required to keep them longer.
3. **Ephemeral:** These e-mails have no connection to the work of the unit and the records have no retention requirement. These e-mails may be destroyed at the discretion of the user. It is recommended that they be deleted as soon as their purpose is fulfilled.
4. **Personal e-mails:** These e-mails are related to the personal life of an individual. Because of their variety, it is necessary to evaluate personal e-mails on an individual basis. Ideally these e-mails should be kept separately from business e-mails.

Businesses should have an e-mail policy that identifies and defines the above mentioned types of e-mails and specifies how long they should be kept.

To help determine whether an e-mail needs to be retained the following questions should be considered:
- Could the e-mail be used as evidence of an action or a decision about an individual, a program, project, etc.?
- Does the e-mail contain information that will be used as a basis for future decisions?
- Does the e-mail require or authorize an important course of action?
- Does the e-mail approve formal policy or set a precedent?
- Does the e-mail detail any obligations or responsibilities?

- Does the e-mail protect the rights or assets of your family or organization?
- Does the e-mail provide evidence of important ongoing relationships, and exchanges of ideas and information, between family or friends? Such personal e-mail is likely to replace the letters we treasured in pre-digital times.

If the answer to all these questions is 'no,' then the e-mail is ephemeral and should be deleted as soon as it is no longer useful. Examples might be e-mails which contain information about upcoming events, meeting arrangements, working drafts, company-wide memos etc.

Preserving e-mail

If the answer to any of the above questions is 'yes,' the e-mail and its attachments should be kept. There are three options for preserving e-mail over the long term:

1. Converting messages into PDF files. It is possible to convert e-mails (with attachments embedded), either one at a time or in groups;
2. Performing regular e-mail backups and maintaining them;
3. Printing and filing e-mails in corresponding folders (especially for personal and routine administrative e-mails).

Dealing with attachments

Attachments present unique challenges for retention and disposition. Many e-mail management systems have a limited storage capacity which is often taxed by excessive attachments. For ephemeral and personal e-mails, attachments can be evaluated on a case by case basis. For executive or decision making e-mails:

- Do not delete or remove an attachment from its original e-mail!
- If you save a copy of the attachment to a location other than your e-mail program (e.g., your local hard drive or a network drive), link it to its corresponding e-mail by using a consistent naming convention, for example, naming all attachments using the date and subject-line of the e-mail.
- When possible, e-mails with their attachments should be kept in the original e-mail environment, especially when the e-mail expresses a decision or an action related to the attachment, such as: "Yes, I approve of the attached document."
- Converting e-mails with their attachments into PDF is an accepted practice.

Organizing e-mail

E-mail should be managed according to your business functions. Create folders based on the activity or project which generated the e-mail. When naming these folders look to the file plan you use for your other records to maintain consistency among paper, electronic and e-mail records!

If a file plan does not exist consider creating one. If necessary, consult local records management experts.

The folder method of organization also facilitates searching and retrieval, and allows for easier destruction. Managing e-mail in this way is recommended over using only the inbox and sent folders or organizing them solely by date.

Some things to consider!

- Forwarded messages may be easily modified by the sender; therefore, they should not be used as official records.
- E-mail is an insecure means of communication. You are the responsible party for the e-mail account. Password protecting all computers in your office is a good first step towards ensuring the security of your e-mail system.

E-mail housekeeping and etiquette guidelines

Handling all business e-mail in a professional manner makes them retrievable, accessible and understandable. Requiring staff to follow certain housekeeping and etiquette guidelines is an important part of proper e-mail management. Listed below are a series of useful guidelines.

Delete drafts of e-mail messages after the final version has been completed and sent.

E-mail threads
- Only keep the last e-mail containing all previous messages on the topic.
- If messages in the e-mail thread have been modified, all copies need to be retained.
- Start a new e-mail message when the subject of the thread changes.

Subject line
- Never leave the subject line blank.
- Never alter the subject line of an already transmitted message.

Message body
- The body of the message you write should build from the subject line.
- Use a proper greeting.
- Be professional. Your message could be read by a third party. Remember, e-mail is *not* a private or secure communication tool.
- Be aware that what you write may be interpreted differently than what you intend, especially since body language is not present.
- Create separate e-mails for separate subjects.
- If multiple issues need to be addressed in a message pertaining to the subject, address each issue in a new paragraph (use bullet points if necessary).
- Use proper punctuation. Do not use all capital letters; do not use all lower case letters.
- Avoid including personal information.
- Never include passwords, social insurance or credit card numbers in an e-mail message.
- Avoid using emoticons (e.g., :-))

Replying to a message

- Ensure that a reply is necessary.
- Be specific in your response if you do not understand the original message. In other words, if you receive an e-mail that is confusing, do not simply write back "What?" or "Please clarify." Provide a brief explanation as to what you do not understand.

Sending messages

- Before sending, check the message for spelling and grammar mistakes.
- When copying other people in a message, make sure only to include the necessary people.
- Always verify the address when replying to a message (be sure you are not sending it to an unintended person, group of people, or listserv).

Attachments

- Ensure that the attachment is necessary.
- Attach first, write second. When sending, double check the message to make sure you attached the document.
- Be sure that the file name of the attachment is clearly identified.
- If your organization or office uses an established and reliable recordkeeping system, you should create links to files instead of sending attachments when sending internal e-mails. This will reduce the number of copies of the document, limit use of storage space, and simplify the management and long-term preservation of the document. When sending links, be sure that the recipient has access to the location.

Additional resources

Administrative Records Classification System (ARCS)
http://www.lcs.gov.bc.ca/CIMB/arcs/admin/main.asp

Operational Records Classification Systems (ORCS)
http://www.cio.gov.bc.ca/services/records/ORCS/default.asp

InterPARES 3 Project. *Consider Donating Your Records to **[Institution name]**.* **[Institution name]** brochure series.

InterPARES 3 Project. *Maintaining Digital Records: Business Edition.* **[Institution name]** brochure series.

InterPARES 3 Project. *Maintaining Your Digital Records.* **[Institution name]** brochure series.

[Institution contact information]