

Email Management Guidelines

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NOTICE

Please do not download or save this document. Find the most recent version of this information on the IPRMO website, under Records Management.

<https://www.ualberta.ca/en/information-privacy-records-management>

This approach prevents the creation of additional copies being saved and printed, created additional transitory documents and promoting outdated reference copies.

Introduction

Email management involves the systematic control of the quality and quantity of electronic messages that are sent from within, and received by, an organization. This document provides advice to University employees on practices for email management with the understanding that email must be managed as a part of a broader records management efforts. These practices mitigate risks that include privacy breaches, potential data loss and storage management.

Purpose

Email is the standard for business communication internationally. While it is often a type of information that is treated differently than other types, it shouldn't be. Email is often viewed as an informal means of communication due to its ease of creation and sheer volume. In reality, email management is a crucial part of records and information management, and efficient email management is needed to reduce risk, limit cost, and meet legal requirements.¹

Emails As Records²

In simple terms, a **record** is defined as information that is recorded in any format or medium, physically or electronically. Emails meet this definition of a record, and therefore controls must be placed on these records, as appropriate under guiding legislation and best practices.

¹ (AIIM, n.d.)

² (Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner of Alberta, 2019)

Official or Transitory?

Like all records and information, emails can be official or transitory. **Official records** provide documentary evidence of the business transactions, activities and decisions. They have ongoing business or historical value, or are required to meet legal obligations. Official records must be **saved and stored securely** and **retained and disposed of** in accordance with the records retention and disposition schedule.

Transitory records only have immediate or short-term value to an organization, and include duplicates, intermediary communications or documents, and most drafts. Once transitory information has served its purpose and are no longer of value, it is important that it be disposed of in an appropriate manner. For emails, this is the deletion of the email from the email server.

The content and context of a piece of information determines if a record is official or transitory, *not* the medium in which it is stored, created or received.

Retaining Emails

Emails that have been identified as official records must be filed in the appropriate recordkeeping system or records repository. Attachments to emails should be captured and stored with the email message as the message often provides the context for the attachment.

Depending on the recordkeeping system or records repository, the format in which the content is saved (ex. .pdf, .msg., .mbox) will differ. Specific information about the use of individual repositories and recordkeeping systems can be found in process documentation in individual business units, and should follow the University framework regarding systems of record.

Deciding Which Emails to Keep

All information that is created, sent or received in the course of carrying out job responsibilities is a record subject to Alberta legislation and potentially an official record subject to management according to the approved records retention and disposition schedule.

To decide if an email is an official record, ask the following questions.

Does the message I have **sent** internally or externally:

1. **Approve or authorize actions?**
2. Contain **formal communication** between staff relating to work?
3. Signify **a policy change or development?**
4. Commit the organization to an **arrangement or to a business deal?**
5. Contain **advice, provide guidance or constitute formal communications?**
6. Have a **business purpose?**

Does the message I have **received** from an **external** source:

7. **Relate to work?**

Does the message I have **received** from an **internal or external** source:

8. Contain information I have used at work to **make a decision?**
9. Is the matter to which the message relates one which **may be reviewed or audited** later?

If the answer to ANY of the above questions is YES, the message should be treated as an official record. This means the records retention and disposition schedule should be applied, and it should be saved in a records repository or recordkeeping system.

For a visual representation of this process, see the *Email Triage Flowchart*.

Responsibility for Capturing Emails

Each employee is responsible for managing the content of their email mailboxes. The following is guidance for who should capture emails during a conversation in order to assure capture occurs while simultaneously minimizing duplicate capture.

- **If you sent it, capture it;**
- If you received it from someone **outside** of the organization, capture it;
 - If there are multiple recipients to a message from outside of the organization, the **main recipient** or the person with prime responsibility for the business documented in the email (e.g. the project lead) captures the message; and
- If in doubt, check with other recipients about who is capturing the message.

For a visual representation of this process, see the *Email Triage Flowchart*.

Responsibility for Deleting Transitory Emails

All employees are responsible for deleting transitory emails on a regular basis. If transitory emails are not deleted immediately upon receipt or after they have been actioned and are instead saved for reference, they should be reviewed every 30 days to ensure that only actively necessary emails are retained.

Effective Email Management Practices³

- Use your **@ualberta account for all University business**.

³ (Victoria University in The University of Toronto, 2023)

- Use short, **meaningful subject lines**.
 - Use a naming convention if your area is using automated metadata capturing, or to assist in manual filing⁴.
- Create **one email per subject**, to facilitate easy filing.
 - Avoid discussing multiple pieces of unrelated University business in the same email string.
- Make **privacy and confidentiality** a priority.
 - Limit personal information to what is strictly necessary,
 - Ensure only the necessary and correct recipients receive the email,
 - Do not use email for personal communications. Never combine personal communications in emails with official University business.
- **Organize your emails** as they are sent and received.
 - Use subfolders to mimic your records retention schedule or departmental filing structure.
- Routinely **set out time to perform email management** tasks once a month, at minimum.
 - Transitory emails should be deleted after 30 days.
 - Official records must be saved to the appropriate records repository.
- Remember that **all written records are responsive to information access requests**.
 - Do not send or retain emails with transitory information or personal comments if you would not want them released to an applicant.

Ineffective Email Management – Red Flags to Look For

The following are examples of outdated email management practices.

⁴ (The University of British Columbia, 2021)

- Keeping Everything/Doing Nothing⁵
 - Email **must** be actively managed. If you are keeping every email, you are failing to abide by the Records Management Policy.
- Inbox Archiving⁶
 - Email archiving is the act of preserving all email to and from an employee. Email archiving is not an effective recordkeeping system, as official and transitory records are not classified, meaning only the longest possible retention period is observed; the contents of the email are often restricted to a single administrator, meaning the records in the inbox cannot be used for organizational decision making.
- Declaring 'email' as a record or filing series.⁷
 - Records are agnostic of format. An email is equally a record to any other document that has been created or received for University business purposes and should be accordingly categorizing with the proper filing and retention rules.
- Maintaining Multiple Formats⁸
 - You do not need to keep more than one format of your email record. If an email has been filed in official record repositories, the copy in the email system should be deleted.

⁵ (AIIM, n.d.)

⁶ (Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner of Alberta, 2019)

⁷ (AIIM, n.d.)

⁸ (Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner of Alberta, 2019)

References

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Quick Reference – Email Management Practices

University employees must follow effective email management practices:

- Use your **@ualberta account for all University business**.
- Use short, **meaningful subject lines** (with naming conventions as applicable)
- Create **one email per subject**, to facilitate easy filing.
- Make **privacy and confidentiality** a priority.
- **Organize your emails** as they are sent and received.
- Routinely **set out time to perform email management** tasks once a month, at minimum.
- Remember that **all written records are responsive to information access requests**.

Always email like your message may one day be read out in a deposition in a court of law.

Quick Reference – Emails as Records

Emails meet the definition of a **record**, and therefore controls must be placed on these records, as appropriate under guiding legislation and best practices.

Like all records, emails can be Official or Transitory, depending on the content and context of the information.

	Official	Transitory
Des crip tion	documentary evidence of the business transactions, activities and decisions ongoing business or historical value, or are required to meet legal obligations	immediate or short-term value includes duplicates, intermediary communications or documents, and most drafts
Inst ruct ion	saved and stored securely and retained and disposed of in accordance with the records retention and disposition schedule	DELETE when no longer of value

To determine if an email is an official record, ask the following questions:

Does the message I have sent internally or externally:
1. Approve or authorize actions?

2. Contain **formal communication** between staff relating to work?
3. Signify **a policy change or development**?
4. Commit the organization to an **arrangement or to a business deal**?
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Who Captures This Email?

- **If you sent it, capture it;**
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- If in doubt, check with other recipients about who is capturing the message.

Questions? Get in Touch!

ualberta.ca/information-privacy-records-management
records@ualberta.ca

Appendix: Email Triage Flowchart

