

Basic E-Mail Management

Records deal with the business of an agency. Non-records don't.

E-mail can be a record.

This is important because e-mails may be records that are public under the new Right-to-Know Law (RTKL). Under that law, agencies will have to respond to requests for public records within 5 days. Many more records are public records under the law and there are sanctions for not complying with the law. Therefore, agency employees need to be able to quickly find any public records that are requested – including their e-mail.

The Commonwealth has rules about how to keep e-mail. These rules are significant for two reasons:

- 1) if you follow them (and they are mandatory), it will be easier for you to find your e-mail, in response to an RTKL request or for any reason; and
- 2) if you deleted an e-mail, while following the Commonwealth rules, you are excused from having to produce it under the RTKL.

Non-record e-mail (personal business, for example) is to be deleted immediately.

But records (information having to do with the business of the agency), including e-mail, have assigned amounts of time for which they are to be kept.¹

For example:

- ★ General office administrative correspondence is to be kept for 5 years.
- ★ RTKL requests are to be kept for 3 years.
- ★ Meeting minutes are to be kept for 6 years.
- ★ Program administration files (including correspondence and memos) are to be kept for 6 years.

E-mail, as a category, has no set amount of time that it should be kept. How long it is to be kept depends on what it is about. So, if the e-mail is an RTKL request, it is to be kept for 3 years; if the e-mail is meeting minutes, it gets kept 6 years; if it is about a program, it may have to be kept for 6 years.

However, some records do *not* have to be retained for the full time. These records are called “transitory” records. They are records, but because they just have short term value, they do not have to be kept for the whole time.

¹ Each agency has a Records Coordinator who can show an employee what those retention periods are.

For example, the following communication is a record, as it has to do with the business of the agency – and it is a program administration record, since it is about a program:

“Please meet me in 5 minutes in Conference Room C to discuss our records management program and what our strategy should be.”

Normally, this e-mail would have to be kept 6 years, since it is a program record. However, since it just has short-term value, to get the person to the conference room to have this discussion, it may be considered as transitory.

There is no simple way to explain when a record is a transitory record. Basically, it is transitory if it just has short-term usefulness for you – such as when it is: to remind you to do something; just a draft that you won't have a business need for after the final is done; simply an e-mail that you were copied on but doesn't require any action on your part; or merely has short term administrative value.

Transitory e-mail is only kept for as long as it is useful and then can be deleted. The idea of a transitory record is useful because it provides a way to delete e-mail that is not of longer term value and is just filling up your in and sent boxes.

For most people, about 80% of their business e-mail is transitory.

If it is hard to decide whether an e-mail is something just of short-term usefulness or if it should be kept for the full length of the record retention period, keep it as a record.

But it is important to clean out your e-mail regularly and delete non-records and whatever transitory records are appropriate for deletion. Remember to check the “sent” mail as well as the “inbox.”

Then you will need to file your e-mail so that you can:

- 1) dispose of longer-term transitory messages once they are no longer useful (don't just leave them somewhere and forget them) and
- 2) keep e-mail records where you can quickly find them.

Once you can tell whether your e-mail is a record, non-record or transitory record, you will be able to learn how to file your e-mail electronically.

Just remember, one of the most important things about e-mail is to try and avoid it! For every e-mail that you send or receive, you will have to decide how to treat it – whether to file, delete or keep it in your in-box for a short period. Using e-mail unnecessarily creates a lot of potential for complications and more records to sort through in the 5 days one has to respond to a RTKL request. So, think twice before sending e-mail and consider using the phone or direct communication!

TRANSITORY RECORDS

Transitory records have short term administrative, legal or fiscal value and should be disposed of once that administrative, legal or fiscal use has expired. They are records that are only useful for a limited period of time to ensure the completion of a routine action or the preparation of a subsequent record. Ongoing disposal of transitory records, especially e-mail, is critical to managing information effectively and reducing records-related costs.

A record with a specific retention period, such as executive correspondence, may fall into the transitory category and therefore have its retention period altered. For example, an e-mail from an executive that says "Meet you in 10 minutes to discuss the energy bill," would be executive correspondence. As such, it has a six year retention period under the General Administrative Schedule, M 210.9. However, since it is also a transitory record, with short term administrative value, it may be disposed of once the administrative value of the meeting notice has expired.

The context of the record is important. A sender may be required to keep a record, but it may be a transitory record for the recipient. One example of this would be a notice to certain employees to take a statutorily mandated training relating to their work. The sender would be required to keep such a record, but the recipients would not.

Depending on the context, transitory records may include, but are not limited to:

- routing slips;
- voice-mail and phone messages (e.g. "Please return call ...");
- miscellaneous notices or memoranda, such as "To All Staff" e-mails, notices of holidays or special events, minor information items about routine administrative matters or other minor issues not pertaining directly to a program area;
- information copies of widely distributed materials, such as committee minutes, agendas, newsletters and publications, such as published reports, administration manuals, telephone directories, catalogues, pamphlets, or periodicals;
- information received as part of a distribution list or e-mail messages received from listservs and other Internet sources, solely for convenience of reference;
- preliminary drafts of letters, memoranda, or reports, and other informal materials that do not record decisions (unless possibly having archival value);
- documents that are superseded or updated, (may not include official reports, newsletters, etc.);
- duplicate copies of documents that are retained only for convenience or future distribution (e.g. extra photocopies, duplicate copies of databases, etc.) and user copies (not original document);
- duplicate stocks of obsolete publications, pamphlets, or blank forms;
- unsolicited advertising materials (e.g. brochures, company profiles, price lists, etc.);
- Information in a form used for casual communication of a transitory nature;
- Information, copies or extracts of documents, received only for convenience of reference and which do not form part of the official record; and
- memoranda (paper-based or email) pertaining to scheduling an event, once it loses its reference value.

How To File Your E-Mail

Not all your e-mail needs to be filed. Non-record e-mail should be deleted immediately and transitory record e-mail should be deleted as soon as possible.

If you have a transitory e-mail that you will only need for 3 months or less, and you have the space in your in-box, you can keep it in your in-box. That way, it may be a reminder for you to act on it, after which it might be deleted.

Records and longer-term transitory e-mails (3 months or more) should be electronically filed, so that they are out of your inbox or your “sent” box.

Many people already file their records in pst folders on their desktop. Some organize their files by date and others may organize them by project or person. The important thing is to have a filing system that makes sense to you and where you can find your e-mail quickly, if you need to retrieve it.

If you don't currently use pst files on your desktop to organize your e-mail, it is a simple process. You can learn and apply it quickly.

There are only 2 new things that you have to do with your pst folders, if you currently use those to organize your e-mail:

- 1) You need to put a records series name and number onto your file groupings (groupings such as program files) and
- 2) also create files for longer term transitory records, so that you remember to delete them once they are no longer needed. (It is important not to put e-mail into a transitory folder, then forget to review it and end up keeping it indefinitely).

Most people only have 3 – 5 record series categories of e-mail, so you will not have a lot of new files to create. Your agency Records Coordinator can help you find the record series name and number to go with your file groups (such as “Program Administration Files G001.007”).

When your records or e-mails are grouped according to the right records series category, you will also know when their retention period is over and they should be deleted.

Some may want to print out their e-mail and keep them in folders. If you decide to do that, be sure that your printed copy has: the sender, all recipients, and the date of sending and/or of receipt. Also, be sure that you keep it in such a way that you can find it easily – and include any attachments.