Recordkeeping for Good Governance Toolkit

GUIDELINE 17: Managing Email

PARBICA
Pacific Regional Branch International Council on Archives

The original version of this guideline was prepared by the Pacific Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (PARBICA) for use by countries around the Pacific. This means that the guideline may refer to things that you are not familiar with or do not use in your country. You may find that you need to change some of the advice in this guideline to suit your own government's arrangements. To obtain an editable copy of this guideline, contact the national archives, public record office or other records authority in your country, or contact PARBICA at http://www.parbica.org.

Recordkeeping for Good Governance Toolkit

Guideline 17: Managing Email

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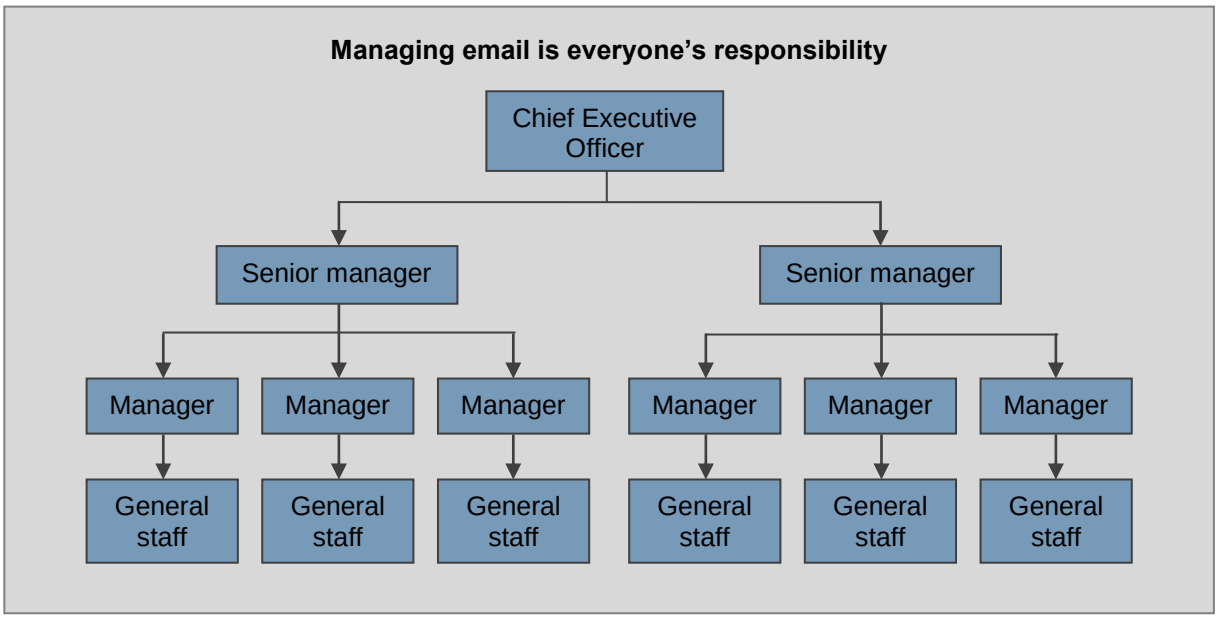
WHO IS THIS GUIDELINE FOR?

As the diagram below indicates, this guidance is for all government employees who use email in the course of their work. Staff that have records and information management responsibilities – such as senior managers, records management staff and ICT managers – may draw on this guideline in creating and developing policies and rules for managing email.

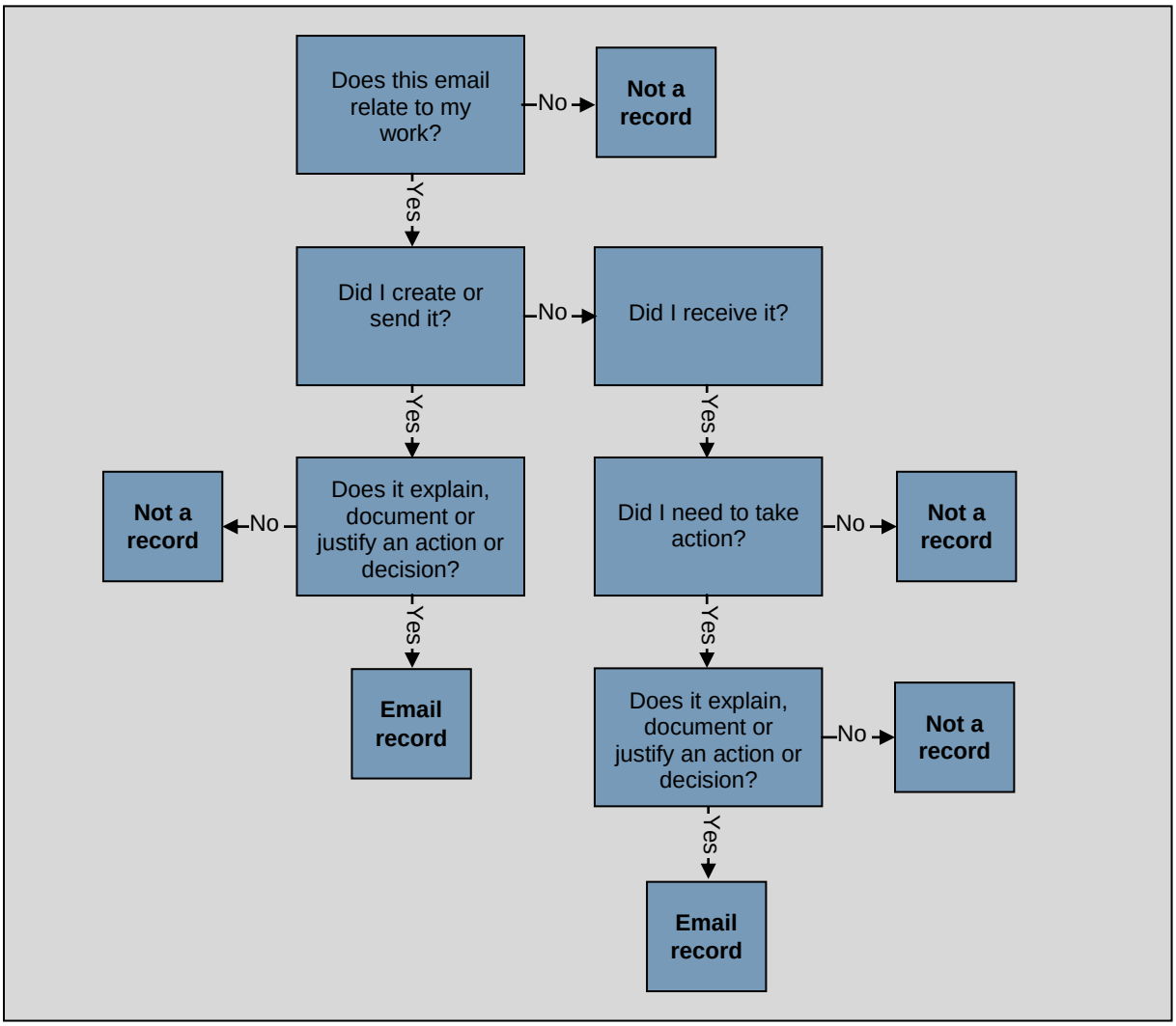
As organisations will have very different records management environments and capacities, some aspects of the guideline will be more relevant than others. The management of email should be understood as part of a broader approach to records management that aims to promote efficiency, accountability and good governance.



WHICH EMAILS DO I NEED TO KEEP?

An email that is written, sent or received in the course of your work is a record. Like all records, emails need to be managed to make sure they can be found and accessed for as long as they are needed. With more and more business being carried out electronically, it is increasingly important that email is managed in a planned and effective way.

Not every email you send or receive while at work needs to be kept. You should save emails that support the work of your organisation, such as those that show decisions that were made or actions taken. The flow chart below can help you to decide if an email needs to be kept:



Examples of emails that do not need to be kept include duplicated emails (when the original has already been captured), spam, messages notifying staff of team meetings, personal emails or information sent to a distribution list.

ADVICE FOR GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES ON KEEPING EMAIL

It is important to remember that unlike personal email accounts, emails stored on a work server or on the hard drive of a work computer belong to your organisation. Because emails relating to official business are a vital source of evidence about the business of an organisation, all such emails should be captured as records into an organisational recordkeeping system.

Email systems are not recordkeeping systems, so it is not acceptable to simply leave your emails in your in-box or your personal email folders. Nor should emails relating to official business be deleted from your email system before they have been captured into a corporate recordkeeping system. You may want to consider using a separate email address or account for your private/personal emails, so that they can be kept separate from your official emails.

When should I use email?
Situations when it is most appropriate to use email might include the following:

- you want to deliver a message quickly, but do not necessarily need a quick reply
- you want to deliver the same message to a large number of people
- you want to create a record of a spoken conversation
- you need to contact a colleague in a different time zone.

The following examples are situations when other forms of communication may be better. When:

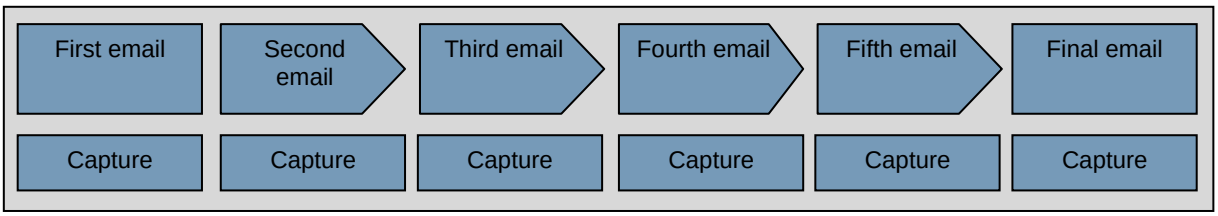
- you require an immediate response
- you are sending confidential information and you cannot risk a breach of privacy
- you need to hold a back-and-forth discussion
- you need to deliver bad news or discuss an emotional matter
- you need to involve a lot of people in your discussion – an option such as teleconferencing may be better.

Who is responsible for capturing emails?
It is important to define staff responsibilities for capturing, deleting, and managing email. This includes staff using individual mailbox accounts as well as shared mailboxes. Often the sender of an email to staff is responsible for making sure it is captured and kept. Other staff who may take responsibility for capturing emails sent to multiple recipients are:

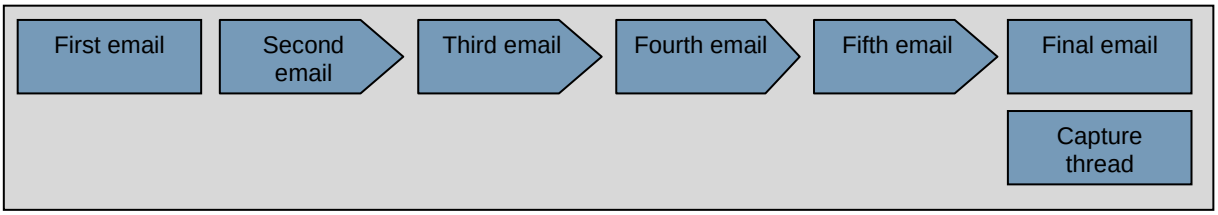
- the recipient who is most directly involved in the email action or decision, or who has responsibility for the issues, task or project
- the secretary or personal assistant for a senior manager.

When should an email thread be captured?
There are different options for when to save the email thread, which can consist of a large number of messages sent back and forth between various people. These options are capture or print:

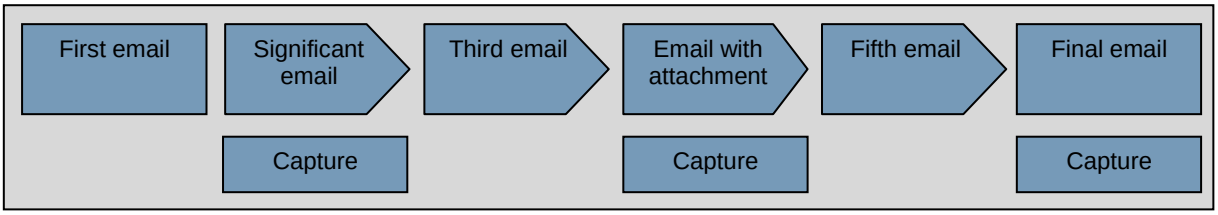
- each email as it is sent or received (this reduces the risk of emails not being captured, but results in a large volume of email captured)



- the last email of the thread (reduces the volume of email captured but carries a higher risk of emails not being captured)



- the significant points in the thread, such as which/when major decisions were made.



What about email attachments?
If an email has attachments these should be included with the original email. If you are filing in a paper system, print out and include the document and any other relevant metadata[1] (such as headers) with the original email, or if filing electronically, make sure the attachment is captured as well. Attachments are an integral part of email records and should always be retained with the emails to which they are attached.

[1] Data describing the context, content and structure of records which enables their discovery, use, management and preservation through time.

ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR KEEPING EMAIL

Some organisations will have in place government-owned and operated email systems, while others will require staff to use a personal email account for sending and receiving work-related emails. When personal email accounts are used for sending and receiving official emails, including third party email providers such as Yahoo, Gmail or other webmail services, the records stored in those accounts are probably not going to be the legal property of the government. In those circumstances copies of official emails will need to be made and stored in a records management system controlled by the government agency. It is important to remember that email applications such as Outlook or Eudora are not records management systems.

The best way to make sure email is secure and able to be found and retrieved over time is to capture it into a records management system. If your organisation does not have an electronic records management system, options include printing emails and filing in a paper system, or saving emails to directories, archiving systems or shared network drives. Capturing email into a records management system means your records with be secure and reliable, and allows your organisation to determine the disposal and retention of email records in line with internal records management policies and practices. For further advice on digital recordkeeping strategies see Guideline 14: Digital Recordkeeping – Choosing the Best Strategy in this Toolkit.

Many government agencies establish limits on the capacity of user mailboxes, requiring staff to delete older messages in order to be able to send new messages. This practice limits the use of storage space in the message system and encourages staff to keep only relevant messages. However, it can also encourage staff to delete messages that should be kept as records of business activity. Mailbox size limits should always be accompanied by sound email management policies and an emphasis on user training to make sure that messages providing evidence of business activity are captured into a corporate recordkeeping system and not deleted. Staff should be encouraged to file emails into the recordkeeping system as a routine practice and not just file them when reaching their mailbox size limit.

TIPS FOR MANAGING EMAIL

Do's and don'ts

Do:

- title the email subject field to make sure it explains the reason for the email
- include enough detail or metadata to provide context over time (for example a signature block providing the name and position of the officer sending the email)
- keep the email short if possible
- write the message clearly, in plain language
- introduce yourself in your first message, if the person receiving the message doesn't know you
- only include recipients who need to know
- retitle the email subject field if the topic changes during the course of an email thread
- attach attachments first and write the message second, to avoid forgetting the attachment
- create rules for managing shared mailboxes to make sure emails are captured or deleted as necessary
- train users to understand their roles and responsibilities in managing and using email (including using appropriate tone and language)
- make sure that saved emails are accessible to those who need them
- decide on appropriate file formats that attachments should be captured in, and let users know
- establish guidelines for using email at work, including conditions for personal use
- promote good email management to staff through such avenues as internal newsletters
- when in doubt, capture an email into a recordkeeping system.

Don't:

- delete important emails from your in-box until they have been captured into an official recordkeeping system
- keep important emails in your in-box or personal folders where only you have access to them
- send or file emails that have misleading or meaningless titles.

EMAIL MESSAGE CHECKLIST

The following checklist includes questions that email creators should ask themselves before sending a message.

Question	**Y/N**
Am I sending the message to the right person? (If I selected the person from a contacts list, have I selected the right person?)	
Does the subject line clearly convey what the message is about?	
Is the body of the email well-structured and clearly written?	
Does the message contain anything that could offend or harm someone?	
Have I checked the spelling, grammar and punctuation?	
Do I expect a reply or some other action? If so, have I specified a timeframe?	
Does the message contain sensitive information? If so, should I really send it by email?	
Does the message contain previous messages? If so, do they need to be included as part of the email or can I delete them?	
Is there an attachment? If so, have I included it?	
If there is an attachment, does the person I am sending it to have the right software to be able to read it?	

The *Recordkeeping for Good Governance Toolkit* was produced by the Pacific Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives with assistance from the National Archives of Australia and AusAID.