State Records NSW
The New South Wales Government's Archives and Records Management Authority

Managing the Message: Guidelines on managing formal and informal communications as records

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Summary

These guidelines cover the processes involved in managing both correspondence and messages as records. This includes making, capturing, storing and disposing of records.

Printable version

The guidelines are also available as a printable version.

Purpose of the guidelines

Increasingly formal and informal communications - correspondence and messaging (such as email or voicemail) - are becoming indistinguishable as a means of doing business. This means that we need to manage records of both largely according to the same rules. These guidelines provide advice on the management of both formal and informal communications as records.

Scope of the guidelines

The guidelines provide advice on the management of correspondence and messages in all formats including paper letters, email, faxes, voicemail, instant messaging, and scanned copies of incoming letters. The guidelines incorporate elements of *Recordkeeping in Brief 5: Managing Mail* (now deleted).

The term 'messages' will be used to cover correspondence and messages in any format.

Note: While this guidance covers messages in any format, the advice given may, where indicated, be relevant to a particular message format.

Who is the guidance for?

This guidance will be useful for records managers and other staff with responsibility for developing and maintaining records management policy and tools.

Why manage messages?

There are a number of benefits for public offices that effectively manage their messages. These include:

- better management of business
- better quality evidence of business decisions that have been made
- the reduction of illegal destruction of records of ongoing value
- efficient management of physical and network storage space, and
- improved retrieval of records for operational needs.

Premier's Memorandum 2004-14 'Use and retention of email for Government communications', requires Ministers to ensure that all agencies '..develop appropriate standards and protocols' for the creation and management of email.

Contacts

For more information, please contact State Records.

Which messages are records?

Whether a message is a record does not depend on its format or means of communication, rather it depends upon whether it was sent or received in the course of official business. For example, an email confirming that Agency X wishes to purchase goods for the cost of Y is a record, the latest email joke is not (usually) a corporate record.

Tips for deciding on whether a message is a record

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Does it approve or authorise actions?
- Is it a formal communication between staff relating to work?
- Does it signify a policy change or development?
- Does it commit my organisation to an arrangement or to a business deal?
- Does it contain advice, provide guidance or constitute formal communications with people inside or outside the organisation?
- Am I required to act upon it?
- Is it external correspondence I have received relating to work?
- Is it something that I have sent for a business purpose?
- Is it something I have used at work to make a decision?
- If I left this job tomorrow, would my successor need the information in this message to continue with this matter?
- Is the matter to which the message relates one which may be reviewed or audited later?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, then save the message into an official recordkeeping system.

What do I have to do with messages?

Making records

There are a number of strategies for making sure that adequate records ofmessages are made. These include:

- format and/or specific policy on message types which are not well managed
- building requirements for making records into business rules
- using templates to prompt people to make records with all the information you need, e.g. for faxes, emails, memos, letters, etc. See

sample email templates

- checking that email systems are set up to keep adequate information on transmission date, time, etc. Note: Most systems do this automatically.

The table below gives some tips when dealing with messages in different formats.

If you are dealing with...	Then...
paper correspondence	for incoming mail - stamp with Date Received and write the file number on the correspondence for outgoing mail - include the date and file number in the letter. Use templates and letterhead to facilitate this. Don't forget to keep a copy of outgoing mail.
faxes on thermal paper	photocopy them onto normal paper as thermal paper fades quickly.
email	most email systems automatically add information about the date and time sent, the email address to which the message was sent, the sender, etc. Make sure this information is being captured by your email system. Encourage staff to check that this information is correct and fix any problems such as incorrect date/time in your email system, as this can be damaging to a record's authenticity. Link replies to the initial email. Do not delete messages from the sequence or important information relating to the transaction may be lost.
instant messaging	if business decisions are being made in instant-messaging systems, then use policy or business rules to direct staff to make a file note or other record of the messages.
voicemail	make sure you document the date, time and name of the caller and recipient. If your system can&#39;t do this, make a file note of messages that need to be recorded.

The table below sets out rules for dealing with particular types of mail.

If the mail...	**Then...**
contains money or cheques	open the mail in the presence of two people where practicable. See *Treasurer's Directions* 118.01 (1)
relates to recruitment	see the *NSW Personnel Handbooks12.2 Handling Enquiries and Applications* for procedures on handling recruitment mail.
contains valuable items (monetary or business value)	establish procedures to monitor the receipt or transmission of valuable items to help prevent theft or loss. Valuable items should be signed for on receipt.
includes tender documents	establish procedures for recording the date and time of receipt as tenders have specific time limits. See Department of Commerce's *Code of Tendering*.
is personal, particularly if marked Confidential, Private or For Personal Attention	establish clear policy so that staff know what will happen to personal mail received at work. Many organisations routinely open incoming mail. encourage staff to use a private address or box for personal mail. if marked Confidential, etc. then set rules that mail is opened either by a senior member of staff or by the addressee.

Capturing/Registering records

Capturing or registering messages into official recordkeeping systems provides evidence that the record exists. Principles for capturing messages are that:

- capture should be timely, e.g. as soon as possible after the message is sent or received.

- the information should be in a format that you can manage over time.

For more information on capturing records and linking them to their business context see How to take control of your records.

What information should be captured?

You need to capture the message and also link it to contextual information. Information that should be captured about the message and its context includes:

- unique identifier
- date created
- date registered (may be the same as date created)
- author and creator (if different)
- subject or title
- business context, e.g. business function and activity to which the message relates
- details of content data format, e.g. MS Outlook, Eudora, etc.

Information that must be captured that is specific to messages includes:

- details of transmission, e.g. date and time sent and/or received
- details of sender and receiver (name, position, public office)
- attachments or enclosures with the message.

Much of this information may be contained in the body of the message, e.g. a letter includes the name of the sender. Some may need to be added deliberately to your recordkeeping system. How this happens will depend on the nature of your system, e.g. whether you have a simple register or a more complex electronic records management system.

Information needed about the record that is needed to manage it over time is known as metadata. For more information on metadata see Recordkeeping in Brief 18: Introducing Recordkeeping Metadata.

Methods of capture

The process for capturing messages into the recordkeeping system needs to be simple and easy for staff to use. Strategies that may work for your public office include:

- automating capture as much as possible. This is easier in electronic business systems where systems can be set up to automatically capture messages when they are transmitted.
- registering individual messages on transmission or receipt.
- attaching messages to a file. Note: This can be a physical file, or an electronic file in a recordkeeping system.

Who should capture what?

In the past, records management staff have often been responsible for capturing incoming and outgoing messages centrally, e.g. paper mail. This ensured that records were captured systematically and linked to related records in formal recordkeeping systems. This system has broken down in many organisations with more devolved practices and developments in communications and technology.

Establish rules for who captures records to avoid gaps or duplication. Whether this is centralised or decentralised will depend upon the way your public office works. It may be a mixture of the two, e.g. paper mail is handled centrally and email is received directly by the recipients. If message handling is decentralised, it is important that all staff understand and follow the rules for capturing messages.

The table below sets out some general principles to follow for capturing messages.

If a message is...	**Then the person who captures it into the recordkeeping system is...**
captured centrally	the records management staff

If the message is...	**Then it is captured by...**
sent externally	the sender
internal	the sender

received from an outside agency	the recipient. Where there is more than one recipient, it is the main recipient or the person where most responsibility for action lies.* If you are not the main recipient, but the sender and other recipients are external to the public office, then capture the email. *Note: If there is any doubt, check with other recipients. Also note that a message may be attached to more than one file if it is about more than one matter.

Tip: Capturing emails

Most email systems can be set up so that the reply automatically includes the initial message. If there is an exchange of emails on one topic

- include all messages in the sequence, i.e. don&#39;t delete the end of the sequence to make the message shorter.
- capture the emails at the end of the sequence so that it need only be captured once. Note: This only applies if the sequence is intact. If not, capture the component parts.

Note: If the email exchange is long and complex you may wish to capture emails individually, or at appropriate points in the sequence, for example, when the subject changes.

Storing records safely and securely

As for other records, messages may need to be kept for quite long periods of time. They must be kept securely in recordkeeping systems for as long as they are needed. They must be protected from damage or loss, whether accidental or deliberate. Just as importantly, they must remain useable over time.

Principles to follow for storing records include:

- Use system security features, e.g. logon and passwords, audit trails, lock filing cabinets and storerooms.
- Business rules set out that all messages should be managed in formal recordkeeping systems, not on personal hard drives or in

desk drawers.

- Business rules set out that the capture of emails into the recordkeeping system must be timely. Emails that are records must be captured before being systematically deleted, e.g. after a certain period of time or when mailboxes reach a defined size.
- Migrate records to new systems systematically. Monitor and record any loss of data as a result of migration.
- Assign access restrictions to messages where necessary (for most messages, this will be done at the file level) and implement these restrictions. This can be done in electronic systems by assigning user permissions based on logon information, or in paper-based systems by restricting access to records storage facilities.
- Monitor electronic recordkeeping systems to ensure that they work reliably at all times and that identified problems are fixed promptly.
- Implement back-up procedures for electronic recordkeeping systems.

See the Standard on the Physical Storage of State Records for more information on storage requirements.

The table below sets out tips for managing records when you can&#39;t keep them in their original format.

If it is...	**Then...**
an electronic message and you can manage it electronically but not in its native format	convert to a standard format. Ideally the format should be non-proprietary, supported by major vendors, easily adopted by users and defined in international standards. XML is gaining currency as a useful storage format.
an electronic message and you don't have the facilities to manage it electronically	Print and file*
a transient format, e.g. instant messages, voicemail	Make a file note. Note: Some systems can capture and manage voicemail messages as records.

*Records must be kept securely and be tamper-proof. Keeping emails in an email system as a long term management strategy does not usually provide adequate safeguards to meet these requirements. If you cannot keep them in a secure electronic recordkeeping system, print them out and file the paper copy.

Tip: Access to emails

Like any other records, emails can be subject to legal discovery processes, be requested under the Freedom of Information Act 1989 and may be required in the long term as State archives and so become open to public access. Recordkeeping systems must be able to keep emails accessible and safe from loss or damage as long as they are needed.

Disposing of records

The disposal of all State records, regardless of format, must be authorised by State Records. Permission is given through general or functional retention and disposal authorities.

Some basic principles to remember relating to the disposal of messages are:

- disposal decisions are usually applied to files rather than individual messages as this is more efficient
- ephemeral or junk mail not acted upon, e.g. email spam, can be destroyed under the normal administrative practice provisions of the State Records Act (see the Normal Administrative Practice guidelines for more information).
- document the disposal of records in your recordkeeping system
- pressing the Delete key does not destroy an email, it simply removes the pointer to the email. To destroy the email the storage device needs to be reformatted or physically destroyed.

For more information on the disposal of records and links to current general retention and disposal authorities see Disposing of Records on the State Records website.

Managing correspondence that has been imaged

Many organisations use technology to speed up workflow by imaging incoming paper correspondence and circulating the resulting digital copy. There are a number of ways to reduce the risk to the public office of this approach. These are:

- that the process is routine and documented, and problems are quickly identified
- copies of records are captured into the recordkeeping system and given the same classification, indexing and retention requirements as the original would have had. They become the State record.
- original or source records are maintained until it has been established that:

- the copies are authentic, complete and accessible

- the requirements for keeping originals have been assessed and fulfilled

- copies can be kept as long as they are needed.

Originals may be destroyed if the record is covered by a current disposal authority that stipulates that it is not required as a State archive and need be kept for less than 30 years. Care must be taken that no originals are destroyed if:

- there are any legal requirements for retaining the originals, e.g. pending legal action or government directives
- the public office is aware of a significant risk relating to these records, e.g. that they confer financial or other benefits that may be subject to legal challenge, or investigations for fraud that could be hindered by the lack of original records. For example, the verification of signatures in a fraud case may be difficult if only an image of the record is retained
- there is no current disposal authority.

State Records recommends obtaining legal advice before the destruction of original records if you are in any doubt. For more information, see GDA 4: Records of short&#45;term value that have been imaged. Local councils should see GDA 10: Local Government Records, Introduction, Section 2.7.

Strategies for improving the management of messages

Strategies for improving the management of messages are summarised here.

Establish corporate policy

Establish corporate policy on managing messages as records. Make sure that this explicitly includes email. Incorporating recordkeeping requirements into

Acceptable Use of Email policies is another tactic.

See Appendix A for the outline of a sample email management policy.

Assign responsibilities for managing messages

Responsibility for managing messages is shared between users, records managers, and system administrators. The CEO has overall responsibility for the public office's compliance with the requirements of the State Records Act.

The table below sets out the typical responsibilities relating to managing messages.

Public office member	**Responsibilities**
Staff	- Sending and receiving messages - Complying with public office records management policy and procedures - Capturing messages into recordkeeping systems
Records managers	- Providing training on managing records - Implementing policies, procedures and tools for records management - Monitoring the capture and maintenance of records in recordkeeping systems - (May be responsible for capture in a centralised system)
System administrators	- Implementing appropriate security and protection measures for electronic systems - Monitoring system reliability - Establish rules for email system management.

Train and educate staff

Raising awareness of what staff need to do is important for improving the management of all records, including messages. Awareness raising may take the form of:

- staff briefings or training sessions

- leaflets
- newsletter items
- Intranet information, and
- presentations at staff meetings.

Use records management software

Many records and document management products can be integrated directly with email systems to enable the seamless capture of emails. Even in entirely paper-based environments, these products are a key part of effective recordkeeping systems, in that they support the management of files onto which paper-based messages are saved.

For more information on records management software approved for use by NSW government agencies, see Recordkeeping in Brief 2: Selecting Records Management Software.

Further information

For further information and advice contact State Records. For related reading see:

Premier's Department, *Policy and guidelines for the use by staff of employer communication devices*, 1999

NSW Office of Information and Communications Technology, *Use of the Internet for Electronic Messaging*, 2002

State Records NSW, *Policy on Electronic Messages as Records*, 1998

State Records NSW, *Standard on the Physical Storage of State Records*, 2000

State Records NSW, *Standard on Recordkeeping in the Electronic Business Environment*, 2000

State Records NSW, *Strategies for Documenting Government Business: The DIRKS Manual*, 2003

Appendix A: What should public office policy on messages address?

The essential features of a policy on messages are set out below. Note:

These can be incorporated into existing policies, e.g. records management policy, acceptable use of email policy.

Ownership of messages

State that messages sent and received using corporate systems are corporate records and must be managed accordingly. Make it clear that this includes email.

Recordkeeping requirements

Identify relevant legal, regulatory and business requirements for making and managing messages as records. E.g. the State Records Act, legislation administered by the public office.

For more information on this see DIRKS Step C Identification of Recordkeeping Requirements.

Terms and conditions of use for email facilities

Give clear instructions on the appropriate use of messages for the transaction of business. This should cover the use of email, letterhead paper, instant messaging, and any other forms of messaging in use in your public office.

Responsibilities

Set out the responsibilities of senior managers, records managers, IT managers and all staff in the policy.

Procedures and guidelines

Refer to relevant corporate procedures and guidance. For example, procedure that staff should follow for the capture of faxes, letters and/or email into official recordkeeping systems.

Security and access

Describe the security provisions and access conditions that apply to the use of the email or other systems.

Definitions of recordkeeping terms

Define recordkeeping terms, particularly those that have different meanings for different professionals. E.g. *record* means something different to a records manager than to an IT professional.

See the Glossary of Recordkeeping Terms for help.

For real examples of email policy see the Examples of policy, procedures and plans on the State Records website.

Appendix B: Managing email at a glance

This appendix sets out the steps for managing email. These are divided into two sections:

- the corporate level, and
- the record level.

At the corporate level

The table below sets out the actions that should be taken at a corporate level to establish the framework for managing email.

Step	Action
1	Develop corporate policy See Appendix A
2	Develop and implement procedures that explain how to capture email into official recordkeeping systems. Note: These may be separate procedures or incorporate rules into existing business procedures. See Examples of policy, procedures and planning documents
3	Develop and issue corporate email templates See Create and Capture templates
4	Monitor performance. For example, • monitor levels of record registration • conduct file audits to check that emails are on files • conduct surveys, interviews and observation of staff involved in recordkeeping tasks.

At the record level

This section sets out the actions staff need to take to manage emails they send and receive.

Before you start, remember that if there is an exchange of emails on one topic it is more efficient and effective to

- use the 'Reply' facility to automatically include the initial message when you reply, and
- capture all messages in the sequence at the end of the sequence or at appropriate points in the sequence. This only applies if the sequence is intact. If not, capture the component parts.

Making and sending email	• Use email templates, e.g. e-memos for internal emails, e-letters for external emails • Decide business function and activity which the email documents and include appropriate file number in email • Make subject line meaningful • Capture into recordkeeping system once sent.

Receiving email from external source

If the email...	**Then...**
is junk mail or spam, or personal	delete (under normal administrative practice provisions).
relates to your work and you are the only or main recipient within the public office	capture into the recordkeeping system.
is sent to more than one staff in your public office	the main recipient captures the email into the recordkeeping system.

Capturing the email

Decide which business function and activity the email relates and find the appropriate file. If no file is relevant, create a new file. Note: These may be paper files or &#39;virtual&#39; files in an electronic recordkeeping system.

If you...	**Then...**

can manage emails electronically*	register into the electronic recordkeeping system. Make sure the title is meaningful &#45; this may mean adding to the subject line, e.g. New shelving (J. Bloggs to D. Smith).
can't manage emails electronically	print out the email and add it to a paper file.

*Note: Keeping emails in an email system, e.g. Outlook, Eudora, is not appropriate for their long term management as they could be tampered with or accidentally deleted.

Capturing attachments

Decide whether to capture attachments with the email or separately.

If you capture attachments...	Then...
separately from the email	cross-reference the email and the attachments so that they can be linked together. Note: Capturing attachments separately can make them easier to retrieve.
with the email	register the email and attachments as one record. If you are printing them out to put on a paper file, keep the email and the attachment physically together.

Disposing of emails

As with all State records, dispose of email in accordance with general and functional retention and disposal authorities. Apply disposal actions to the file rather than to individual emails.

The table below gives advice on disposing of email in your email folders.

If the email...	Then...

is junk mail or spam	delete (under normal administrative practice provisions).
relates to your work and you are the only or main recipient within the public office	delete from your Inbox once captured into the recordkeeping system. Note: You may want to keep a convenience copy for reference. Routinely disposing of convenience copies of emails is good desktop management practice.
is sent to you but you are not responsible for capturing it	delete from your Inbox once you are sure that the email has been captured into the recordkeeping system. See note above
sent by you and relates to your work	delete from your Sent folder once captured into the recordkeeping system. See note above
sent or received by you and does not relate to your work, e.g. is personal or ephemeral	Delete once reference ceases. Do not capture into the recordkeeping system.

Note: Pressing the Delete key does not usually destroy an email, it removes the pointer to the email. To permanently destroy an email, the storage device must be reformatted or destroyed.

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