Email Overload:
What an Organization Can Do to Assure Proper Handling of Important Emails

Have you ever wondered how long you should keep an email? Email has become one of the most widely-used and, for many, essential forms of communication and information sharing. On any given day, you might receive emails from clients, co-workers, family, friends, solicitors, and so on. Email often replaces phone calls and can save time by decreasing face-to-face meetings, even when the other person is just down the hall.

Although benefits are great, email can also be burdensome. Managing email has become a challenge for many organizations. If each person in an organization of 60 is sent an average of 40 emails a day, 2,400 emails will be received. In addition, many more emails are typically filtered by a junk mail system. Some emails are business related, some are kept as reference, some are administrative in nature, and there are those that get deleted.

Once the decision is made to keep an email, it is either saved in the general inbox or moved to a designated folder for future use. In addition, a person will likely respond to many of the emails, forward some to other people, and have a record of all emails that were created and sent. Assume that at least 20 of the 40 emails were saved, 20 replies were sent, 5 were forwarded to at least one other person, and 20 emails were created and sent. That's about 65 emails added to a person's system on a daily basis. Multiplying that by 60 people and roughly 3,900 emails are handled daily - more than a million processed annually.

Managing these massive volumes of email poses many risks and challenges. Physical and electronic storage becomes a major ordeal. Many of these emails have attachments, requiring additional storage space. If a person is not diligent about deleting emails regularly or ensuring deleted emails actually are deleted, that's more storage space being used for unimportant, discarded information. And if you are like most of us, some of the emails saved as reference are long forgotten until the email system begins sending notices of space limitations.

What a user decides to keep or delete can create serious consequences. Deleting essential emails could result in something important being destroyed. And searching through volumes of email saved within an inbox can require hours of valuable time.

What can your organization do to minimize these challenges? Email is an essential component of an organization's operations. A program should be developed to address email and should mirror any hardcopy systems that have been developed whenever possible.

It has been said that a company should not plan its records management program around the assumption that it will someday be taken to court. However, there is an obligation to keep information intact when it is foreseeable that a legal challenge is imminent. If an organization cannot produce records that have been requested during the discovery process, juries may be given an adverse inference instruction – that is, they could be instructed to infer that any missing information is damaging

to the party that cannot produce the requested information, if, in fact, that information is known to have existed at one time.

Below are some guidelines to help an organization initiate a program to address email. These steps will assist in identifying information that is sent and received by its employees while helping staff understand how long essential information should be maintained.

- ➢ Designate one person to be responsible for organization-wide information management. This person should be given the cooperation and full support from the top – whether it is the managing partner of a firm or the president of a university.
- ➢ Identify one person in each department as the "go to" person to assure rules and practices are followed and that the department is in compliance and is being responsible with email. Each will work with the organization's information "manager" to establish and implement policies and procedures for managing all types of information including email.
- ➢ When in doubt, appoint a committee. This committee should:
  - ✓ Include the information manager, those assigned to oversee records within each department, someone from the IT department, a legal representative, human resources/payroll, and the risk manager.
  - ✓ Create an action plan to develop policies and procedures relating to email, as well as electronic and hardcopy information created and collected by the organization. Assign committee members, a team, or an appropriate staff person to be accountable for completing identified tasks to implement the plan. This committee should meet regularly and establish issues and topics to be addressed, and arrange for training from the state archives division, the secretary of state, and other entities that have already taken steps to address email and records management issues in general.
  - ✓ Conduct an inventory of the types of emails sent and received; identify how people manage their email system to obtain ideas for implementing a plan that will work for the organization.
  - ✓ Develop a classification system to assist in identifying the importance of information sent and received. Designations could include such terms as essential, historical, or permanent, project or working copy, reference, administrative, obsolete, duplicate, etc. Retention schedules could be assigned to each type of classification to help staff determine how long to keep information.
  - ✓ Develop a retention schedule that will work for all departments.
- ➢ Training should be provided to all staff throughout the organization, but should start with committee members. Once the action plan and retention schedule have been developed, training should be extended to management and other staff until everyone in the organization has been trained to properly handle information sent and received.
- ➢ Rules should be reviewed periodically to assure continued compliance.
- ➢ IT should assure that essential emails are being saved on a drive that is backed up on a routine basis.

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