

Why Do We Need to Preserve Email?

Why is preserving email important?

Since the first email was sent in 1965, it has grown to become one of the most commonly used forms of communication for both personal and business interactions. As much of modern correspondence takes place via email, it can provide important evidence of:

- Decisions made
- The development of strategy and plans
- Meetings held
- Documents shared
- Actions performed
- And much more.



Preserving access to emails can be essential to ensuring the accountability of those in power, and they are also an important historical and social record. A key report on email preservation, “The Future of Email Archives”¹, states that “email doesn’t just document digital life; it documents life itself.”

What risks do emails face?

Email is a format that is ubiquitous but also ephemeral, and this can cause problems for long-term preservation. The risks faced include the following:

- Due to the volume and nature of email we often see it as disposable, so it is deleted to clear space without much consideration of the importance of the content.
- Emails often belong to a long thread of messages back and forth between correspondents. An email may be rendered meaningless if the rest of the thread is not saved.
- Emails can be complex, containing links to external content, which is required to understand the message, as well as allowing almost any type of file to be included as an attachment.
- Email is particularly susceptible to malicious actions. For example, it is often a top target for hackers, or an account might receive large amounts of spam.
- Most organizations don’t have clear policy and guidance for email users on how to manage and preserve email, meaning that everyone takes a different approach.
- Email correspondence often contains proprietary, sensitive, or private information, so providing access can raise issues with regards to Intellectual Property Rights, Freedom of Information, and Data Protection.

Who is responsible for email?

More than with any other type of digital content, the responsibility for the active management of email sits with individual users. Typically, we manage our individual inboxes, choose which

¹ <https://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub175/>

emails to retain, create folder structures, and organize messages. We also often feel more free to delete an email than we might with other types of digital content. It is, therefore, important that we recognize that we have a responsibility to manage our email well, taking a methodical and considered approach which follows guidance and advice.

However, not all of the responsibility for the management of email lies with the user. For example, an organization's IT Department is often/typically/usually responsible for installing and maintaining email software, as well as managing storage, user accounts, and in some cases the mail exchange server used to transfer email. Additionally, records management and/or archives staff have responsibilities for creating email retention policies and guidance. Archives staff will also be responsible for the long-term preservation of emails when they are no longer in active use.

How can email be preserved?

Printing emails might seem like an easy or obvious option, but this can lead to the loss of a large amount of information. Lost information can include file attachments, contextual information in relation to other messages (such as threads), and information about the sender and recipients that is stored in email headers.



Email can be preserved as a single message, by folders, or as the content of a whole user account. To allow this to happen, the emails to be preserved will be exported from the account using the email software's own functionality or by using one of a variety of specialist tools. You may be asked to export the contents of your own email account, in which case training and guidance should be provided. Alternatively, an archivist may need access to your account and/or computer to carry out the export of emails. They may also ask you to provide information about how you use and organize your email

to help them understand what should be preserved.

What steps can be taken to facilitate email preservation?

There are a few simple steps that can be taken to help facilitate email preservation. These include:

- Adhering to any policy or guidance relating to email use, management, and retention.
- Do not delete any emails from a work email account unless guidance explicitly states that you may. This will normally include messages such as personal emails, spam, and those received from mailing lists.
- Turn off any auto-deletion functions and make sure there is enough storage for the volume of emails received.
- Keeping all email in one account, rather than forwarding between different work and personal accounts.
- Plan for how you will manage your emails, including setting up folders for filing important emails and doing this on a regular basis.