CORPORATE EMAIL MANAGEMENT POLICY: HOW TO IMPROVE DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explain the specifics of email as corporate mail and to underline some of the main transformations that it has allowed to organizational communication and the challenges to information management in professional contexts. The need to create an email management policy defining usage rules, in order to overcome some administrative, ethical, legal and economic problems or the loss of organizational memory will be emphasized. A set of documents produced by five archival national agencies, from Brazil, Canada, South Africa, United Kingdom, and USA, will be analysed in order to define the main topics that should be considered in any corporate email management policy. The five documents will be presented comparatively using an analysis grid. As an output of the content analysis from these national documents on email management policies, a set of recommendations about the main topics to be included in a corporate email management policy will be presented.

Keywords: email management; corporate email; digital transformation; email policy.

INTRODUCTION

Currently, email is leading the processes of information creation and communication flows at the organizational level. This contributes to the paperless office, i.e. a work environment in which the use of paper is eliminated or greatly reduced. This is done by converting mail documents and other papers into digital form. Therefore, the use of corporate email is one of the first and older attempts to promote the digital transformation of organizations. Digital Transformation can be defined as the adoption of digital technology to transform services or businesses, through replacing non-digital or manual processes with digital processes or replacing older digital technology with recent digital technology (Vial, 2019). Email also contributed to digital transformation as it caused changes in the organizational dynamics, namely in terms of information creation and flows. For information registry and storage, email also represented a major change, both for personal and professional use, which facilitated communication.

According to Terra (2014, p. 147-151), email has led to info-communicational changes within organizations, leading to positive and negative effects. As positive aspects, it is worth noting the speed of responses, the decrease in communication costs, the decentralization of the origin of communication and the increase in communication exchanges. In addition, email brought new challenges regarding the production, organization, dissemination, use and preservation of organizational activities.

Having this background in mind, organizations need to define email usage and management rules, creating a formal corporate email management policy or strategy. In the following, the information produced and sent by email will be available to support the daily work of the organization and aspects of safeguarding, preservation and long-term access will be attended, when necessary. The information that is produced and flows in emails must be managed and preserved so that its reliability and authenticity can be guaranteed to support activities such as operational procedures, legal validation and accountability in organizations or research.

With suitable policies and/or strategies, institutions will be able to select and implement appropriate tools to support their procedures, which will define how systems support policies and how users should interact with systems, allowing the organization to manage emails throughout the information life cycle. Institutions should also pay particular attention to formulating guidelines, rules and procedures that clearly involve users of email systems, as they are the ones who use and maintain them permanently.

In this paper, the core topics to be considered when formulating an organizational email management policy or strategy will be outlined. A set of documents produced by five archival national agencies, from Brazil, Canada, South Africa, United Kingdom, and USA, will be analysed in order to define the main topics that should be considered in any corporate email management policy. A brief literature review on the concept of email and email management will also be presented.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emails are a type of electronic messages and fit in correspondence documentary category. The Association of Records Managers and Administrators (ARMA, 2012) defines electronic messages as a message (i.e., structured content meant for communication) sent between networked computing stations. The timing of delivery depends on the network connections' availability. It may assume the form of e-mail, instant messaging, or text messaging. As explained by Zhang (2015), correspondence presents a set of specific characteristics: normally it pertains to an individual, organization or place; it covers a certain period of time; it relates to one or a few subjects; it applies to a particular purpose; and it results in a series of mutual communications (outgoing or incoming). All these features apply to email messages, which need to be considered as corporate correspondence. Zhang (2015) also explained that the evolution of the email system has successfully incorporated the experience of correspondence recordkeeping to achieve the integrated functionality of email creation, transmission, storage and organization.

Given its complexity, the definition of email could be difficult to achieve. According to the Task Force on Technical Approaches for Email Archives, (2018, p. 22) "Email is both one thing and many things. It's an individual message; it's a collective noun for all the messages in a mailbox; it's an active verb ("I'll email you later today"). But behind each of these uses, email is the system that creates, distributes, and receives messages according to the rules of a defined, extensible set of standards."

E-mail can be defined as a system used in the creation, processing and reception of electronic messages, originating "digital native" documents (CONARQ - Conselho Nacional de Arquivos, 2012, p. 4). These "digital native" documents can become electronic records. An electronic record is defined by Duranti (2003) as a record created or used in electronic form, with the following essential characteristics: 1) a fixed form, meaning that the binary content must be stored so that it remains complete and unaltered, and its message can be rendered with the same documentary form it had when first stored; 2) an unchangeable content; 3) explicit linkages to other records within or outside the digital system, through a classification code or other unique identifiers; 4) an identifiable administrative context; 5) an author, an addressee, and a writer; and 6) an action, in which the record participates or which the record supports either procedurally or as part of the decision making process.

The specifics of e-mail messages rely on its structure, which is as follows:

- A header, which contains information related to the sending and delivery process (identification of the sender and recipient, date, and other information inherent to the sending and receiving processes);
- A body, which contains the information to be transported, either by means of text,

or by other forms of representation;

- Optionally, the information to be transported can be aggregated through attachments. (Arquivo Nacional (Brasil). Coordenação-Geral de Gestão de Documento, 2013).

Emails, as documents created and transmitted electronically, need to be considered for the purpose of long-term safeguarding, preservation and recovery (if applicable). As electronic records they must be preserved in a way that their reliability and authenticity can be guaranteed. According to Prom (2011), this email long term preservation requires the definition of a corporate email management policy that responds to technological challenges and that knows how to take advantage of technology. This policy should also have in mind the legal context, and the local institutional culture, which will shape the dissemination, management and storage behaviours of email's users. Organizational and cultural challenges remain the most significant barrier to the implementation of an email management policy and adequate procedures. In order to overcome these issues, the email management policy needs to consider the entire email lifecycle stages and to involve all the actors related to email management, since this is not a single duty of the account holder: records' manager, archivist and technologist also need to play a role in the procedures' definition (Task Force on Technical Approaches for Email Archives, 2018).

Workplace email use is a core tool for professional purposes and it is not related to technological predispositions nor gender. Nevertheless, some studies show that older individuals use their email for more administrative or management purposes while younger cohorts engage in a more personal use (Phillips & Reddie, 2007). Empirical studies have shown that in a professional context, email is an essential tool for internal, external and organizational communication. It is a key tool to support transactional work, an important repository for information storage and search. At the same time, it also raises concerns by workers who claim to spend a lot of time managing (reading, replying, organizing, searching) their email accounts (Sainz-Aloy & Soy-Aumatell, 2011). Email users have specific needs regarding the way they interact with their email tool: managing their email-related tasks by constantly checking their status and reacting to it accordingly and by deciding on messages archiving outside or inside the inbox (Szóstek, 2011). Email users' behaviour is an important input in the way email is managed in organizations, so it is essential to know these behaviours and define and share optimized rules for email usage (Ramsay & Renaud, 2012). Each institution needs to identify and analyse the way how individuals use their email accounts. Therefore, each organization needs to complete this specific work with a multidisciplinary team and representatives of all the institution's departments. Nevertheless, some generic rules and areas of intervention can be firstly identified. This broad approach will be described in the next chapter of this paper.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is a partial output from an academic work presented on a course unit from the 6th semester of the degree on Library and Information Sciences and Technologies, from Polytechnic Institute of Porto, in the academic year 2019-2020. In the subject course of Project in Information Services and Resources, a project-based learning methodology is implemented and students are challenged to choose and carry out a project based on Information Science theory and practice (Terra, 2020). One of the students' teams chose to work on the topic of corporate email management policy (https://politicainstitucionaldegestaodoemail.politics.blog/). The main goal of the project was to create a document defining what a corporate email management policy should be, based on the analysis of five email management policy guidelines emanating from national archives of different countries. Based on a literature review, a comparative grid was created with fifteen evaluation criteria for the documents' analysis: 1. Managing email messages, 2. Preservation,

3. Use of a classification scheme, 4. Ways to mitigate the loss of email records, 5. Ways to report lost emails, 6. Data migration, 7. Backup and disaster recovery, 8. Employees roles in managing email, 9. Encryption use, 10. Benefits of email management policy, 11. Guidelines for writing work email messages, 12. Misuse of email, 13. Levels of responsibility, 14. Email management as records, 15. Disposal of email messages.

This grid was applied in the comparative analysis of the selected documents. Thus, it was possible to identify the most relevant and critical aspects to be taken into account when developing an email management policy. This identification helped the elaboration of a guiding document for an organizational email management policy that could be a guide for any institution. The results of this analysis are presented below.

RESULTS

Internet searches allowed to find guiding documents for email management, available on several national archival institutions, and five documents were identified and selected for analysis (Table 1).

Table 1: National policies on email management

Country/Institution	Year	Title
Brazil. National Council on Archives	2012	*Diretrizes para a Gestão Arquivística do Correio Eletrônico Corporativo*
Canada. Library and Archives Canada. Government Records Branch	2008	*Email management guidelines*
UK. The National Archives	2004	*Guidelines on developing a policy for managing email*
USA. National Archives and Records Administration	2014	*Guidance on managing email*
South Africa. National Archives and Records Service	2006	*Managing electronic records in government bodies: policy, principles and requirements*

The oldest document is from 2004, from the United Kingdom, and the most recent from 2014, from the USA. Despite the fact that the South Africa document relates to electronic records in a broader sense, and since email is included in several aspects, it was decided to include it.

The grid created with the evaluating criteria was then applied to the selected documents. Based on Table 2, it is noticeable that each country/institution has different approaches, valuating different kind of aspects to define guidelines for email management.

Four documents include aspects related to preservation, three to the application of a classification scheme, two to the management of email messages, two to backup, two to the levels of responsibility and two to the elimination of email messages. The document that covers the largest number of criteria is the document created by the United Kingdom in 2004. The South Africa document covers five criteria and Canada's covers four.

Table 2: Analysis grid applied to the national policies documents on email management

Analysis criteria	Policy documents				
	Brazil, 2012	Canada, 2008	South Africa, 2006	USA, 2014	UK, 2004
1. Managing email messages	X				X
2. Preservation	X	X	X	X	
3. Use of a classification scheme	X	X	X		
4. Ways to mitigate the loss of email				X	
5. Ways to report lost emails				X	
6. Data migration			X		
7. Backup and disaster recovery			X	X	
8. Employees roles in managing email					X
9. Encryption Use					X
10. Benefits of email management					X
11. Guidelines for writing work email					X
12. Misuse of email					X
13. Levels of responsibility		X			X
14. Email management as records					X
15. Disposal of email messages		X	X		

After analysing the proposals of different countries regarding the management of corporate email, it was possible to understand what are the most relevant aspects to take into account in the formulation of a guiding document for an email management policy. Thus, the following aspects were selected.

- Management of email messages
- Preservation
- Data migration
- Backup and disaster recovery
- Ways to report lost emails
- Email encryption
- Levels of responsibility for email in the organization
- Guidelines for writing email messages at work
- Misuse of email

These topics were used to create a document with guidelines for a broad email management policy to be adapted by organizations, where the following aspects were addressed: benefits of an email management policy; advantages of using corporate email, and measures to be adopted by organizations when facing email, where each of the nine aspects were explained.

The main objective of an email policy is to facilitate effective communication and ensure that the records of those communications are maintained. The production of an email policy will clarify an organization's position on how email should be handled within it.

For an email policy to be effective, it is essential that the policy is developed with the agreement and support of top management and in collaboration with representatives of several employees in each department. The organization should explain the need for the development of an email

policy and its benefits.

In this context, the advantages include clarifying the organization's position on how to analyse the email, improving the division of responsibilities, accurate identification of information necessary for business and greater control over the production of abusive messages.

As for the possible measures taken by the institution, email messages should be considered as records, avoid undue deletions of messages, define responsibilities and the respective access rules, invest in the continuous training of employees, respect the life cycle of digital information, ensure regular backups and prevent technological obsolescence.

CONCLUSIONS

Following ARMA (2012, p. 3-4) recommendations on electronic messages, as an all, the organization should establish, document, maintain, and promote an email policy, that should include a set of implementation procedures and practices for managing emails, and implement email systems to ensure the organization's business needs are met. The policy for managing emails shall be adopted throughout the organization and endorsed by the highest decision-making level of the organization. The policy should be published, communicated, circulated, and implemented throughout the organization. The policy should be regularly reviewed and revised, as needed, to reflect current compliance requirements and changes in technology.

Creating and implementing an email management policy will allow organizations to improve their digital communication and working efficiency.

Thus, this paper can have a practical impact as the recommendations can be used by any organization that strives to improve the use of email for communication and information management purposes. Email is a powerful tool for digital transformation in every organization but it has to be properly managed to produce better results.

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