
Electronic Records Management: How Long Do Emails Need to be Kept?

Purpose: Provide guidance to state agencies and local government entities on the retention of emails.

Is there one retention period for emails?

NO – The retention period for public records depends on the *function* and *content* of the record, not its format or method of transmission.

How long emails need to be kept depends of the agency's business, legal and accountability needs to retain the evidence of the transaction that is documented in the email. Like public records in any format, some only need to be kept for a very short time, some need to be kept a little longer, and some will be "Archival" and kept forever.

The questions to ask to determine the function/content of emails are:

1. What is the email about? (content)
2. Why was it sent and for what purpose? (function)

Having just one blanket retention period for emails is akin to having a single retention period for all letter-sized paper – the format does not determine the retention.

Is simply keeping all emails for a fixed period the answer?

NO – Storing every email is not the same as managing public records created and/or received as emails. Such a strategy is unlikely to be sustainable in the long run, will make it harder to locate the public records that do need to be retained and may not be the most efficient use of agency resources.

Where can I find out what the retention is based on the function and content?

RECORDS RETENTION SCHEDULES – These schedules set out the minimum required retention periods and grant permission to either destroy or transfer the records at the end of that period. The current approved records retention schedules are available from Washington State Archives' website at:

State Agencies:

<http://www.sos.wa.gov/archives/RecordsManagement/RecordsRetentionSchedulesforStateGovernmentAgencies.aspx>

Local Government Entities:

<https://www.sos.wa.gov/archives/RecordsManagement/Local-Government-Records-Retention-Schedules---Alphabetical-List.aspx>

**Additional advice regarding the management of public records is available from
Washington State Archives:**

**www.sos.wa.gov/archives
recordsmanagement@sos.wa.gov**