
Electronic Records Management: Keep the Last Email or All Emails in the Thread?

Purpose: Provide guidance to state and local government agencies on the retention of emails where there is a thread of emails involved.

Keep all emails in the thread.

Emails rarely occur in isolation. Most of the time, an initial email is followed by a response or a series of back-and-forth emails. These are commonly referred to as a *thread*, *conversation*, or *string*.

Agencies often ask whether it is enough to retain just the last email in a thread rather than keeping each individual email. This strategy raises several issues:

1. **When does the thread truly end?** – All too frequently, email threads that seem to have run their course are restarted because the topic has become active again, or another topic is started using the previous email thread. This makes it difficult to know which email is truly “the last one.”
2. **Has the thread been changed?** – The body and metadata of the earlier emails appear only as text in the final email. If this earlier information is changed, no evidence exists that the thread has been altered. Therefore, it is difficult to prove that the last email in a thread does indeed capture all previous email exchanges.
3. **Metadata is lost** – The metadata for the final email in a thread only verifies the authenticity of the most recent message sent or received. Most of the metadata from the earlier messages does not appear and what little remains appears as text in the body of the email. Just as printing emails results in the loss of important metadata, keeping only the last email in the thread strips important metadata about the conversation that has taken place.
4. **Each email is a public record** – If the email relates to the conduct of public business (which means it is about the work of the agency), then it satisfies the definition of public records. By deleting all but the “last” e-mail, you may be destroying public records before they have met retention.

For these reasons, Washington State Archives strongly recommends that agencies keep each individual email in the thread and not just the last one.

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

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