Canadian government agencies develop e-mail management policies

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

As e-mail has become a widely used communication tool by the Government of Canada (GoC), this article examines current e-mail management policies and system implementation in Canadian government agencies. GoC implemented the Records, Document, and Information Management System (RDIMS) as an integrated system tool for efficient document and records management. RDIMS provides the capability to create, manage, and access information and documents, regardless of ministerial, departmental, or geographic location. GoC presents legal guidance on e-mail management, based on the Access to Information Act, Privacy Act, and Library and Archives of Canada Act. Developing an e-mail management policy promotes an effective capture, management, and retention of e-mail messages.

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1. Introduction

Electronic mail (e-mail) has become a major tool for organizational and interpersonal communications and is one of the most business-critical information management applications (Stephens & Wallace, 2003). One study found that an average corporate user generates and receives about 84 e-mails a day, requiring about 100.16 megabytes of storage; this number is expected to rise to 15.80.16 megabytes by 2008 (Moerdler, 2006). E-mail has changed the way business is conducted in working environments because of its ease and speed and also because of the cost-effectiveness of sending and receiving information in electronic form. For the Government of Canada (GoC), e-mail has become the most frequent form of communication (Library and Archives Canada, 2006c). GoC has made attempts to establish e-mail systems and provides policies on e-mail management guidelines across ministries, departments, and government agencies. However, research into the effectiveness of implementing current e-mail management systems and policy guidelines into practice in the Canadian government has been rare to date.

This study reviews current e-mail management trends and problems by exploring the e-mail management policies and practices of Canadian government agencies. It describes e-mail messages as records and reviews the existing e-mail management policy guidelines of five federal agencies in the Canadian government on the basis of system, legal compliance, and records management. Finally, this study discusses issues related to e-mail management and suggests further implementation tasks to be addressed by the Canadian government.

2. Definition and composition of e-mail messages

The term *e-mail* has a dual meaning; it refers to (a) an e-mail system that transports messages along electronic networks, and also (b) an e-mail message. It is analogous to the term *mail,* which refers to standard postal mail services and the letter itself.

Technically speaking, e-mail is electronically transmitted information created on or received by a computer system. The Association of Records Managers and Administrators (ARMA, 2000) states that e-mail is used to "store and forward" messages by means of "electronic messaging technology that permits individuals to send and receive information by internal and/or external mail distribution systems" (p. 1). The Society of American Archivists (SAA; Pearce-Moses, 2005) explains that e-mail systems comprise an application called a mail user agent (MUA), through which clients or readers incorporate a text editor to send and receive messages, and a mail transport agent (MTA) to store and forward messages. Many MUAs and MTAs are based on POP3 or IMAP standards to allow different systems to be interoperable. E-mail systems commonly transmit messages using the simple mail transport protocol (SMTP), which is implemented on a closed network using proprietary software to exchange messages, typically in RFC 2822 or multipurpose Internet mail extension (MIME) formats.

Structurally, the term *e-mail* commonly refers to the message itself. An e-mail message consists of a header, a message body, and optionally, attachments. The header includes information to be delivered and additional information used as metadata to identify,

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classify, and contextualize the message, such as the sender, recipient, subject, date, and time. The body of a message can be made up of or include brief notes, formal reports, or substantial narrative documents, images, text files, multimedia files, any conceivable form of ASCII files, executable program files, or HTML. Attachments can be in any format. Unlike instant messages, e-mail allows asynchronous connections to send or receive messages (Pearce-Moses, 2005).

2.1. E-mail messages as official records

E-mail messages, when transmitted through an organization's e-mail system, must be managed as any other information, and they tend to be declared official records by governments, nationally and internationally. E-mail first became an important issue in the United States with what is called the PROFS case, in which the court decided that e-mail messages could themselves be federal records (ARMA, 2000). In Canada, LAC (2006a) declared that e-mail messages that are created, transmitted, or received in the course of government business are official records, and further, GoC is moving toward e-records as the preferred record of business. E-mail records and any accompanying attachments must be kept to guarantee the integrity of the organizational memory of GoC and retain their value as evidence of government business. Natural Resources Canada (2004) has also announced that e-mail messages are included as records that must be managed with legislative, business, and accountability considerations in mind.

3. E-mail management policy in government

A large body of literature addresses e-mail management and e-mail systems. The majority mentions the significance and impact of e-mail on business and communications in various organizations—including corporations, universities, international organizations, nonprofit organizations, and IT-related industries—without addressing current problems in e-mail management. A small but increasing number of studies present the results of hands-on surveys or exploratory tests on e-mail management. For example, Seow, Chennupati, and Foo (2005) conducted a survey of e-mail usage, policy, and technical considerations in several Singapore organizations and recommended the adoption of an integrated e-mail management approach in Singapore. Only a small number of studies deal with e-mails in government environments. Patterson and Sprehe (2002) discussed the challenges of electronic records management, including e-mails in the United States federal government, and emphasized the importance of integrated system design and total information management. Most of the existing studies seem to agree that the dramatically growing number of e-mail messages must be managed in appropriate ways.

For effective e-mail management, many organizations, including government agencies, develop e-mail management policies and guidelines (ARMA, 2000). In response to this trend, ARMA addressed the five key perspectives that need to be considered when developing e-mail management policy in organizations:

(1) System perspectives, such as issues related to system installation and setup, e-mail software application, system functionality, network, security, encryption, digital signature, and authentication,
(2) Legal perspectives, such as issues related to compliance with laws and regulations, access issues, copyright restrictions, and privacy issues,
(3) Records management perspectives, such as issues related to organization and management of information contained in

e-mail messages, migration and preservation of e-mail messages, the destruction of e-mail messages in accordance with an established retention schedule, and methods for ensuring the integrity of the e-mail,
(4) Business perspectives, such as issues related to appropriate use of e-mail created from business processes, the need to protect proprietary business information and trade secrets; and
(5) User perspectives, such as issues related to e-mail etiquette and user behavior patterns in cyberspace.

According to ARMA (2000), an effective e-mail management policy should take into account system-related technical issues. Without properly functioning software applications, it can be impossible to organize, manage, store, and retrieve e-mail messages, because an e-mail inbox is not a record-keeping system. E-mail management policy should also reflect the organization's legal and regulatory framework, because organizations reside in juridical contexts in which there are laws that grant the public the right to request government information. Importantly, records management perspectives should be addressed in e-mail management policies. Managing e-mail messages requires identifying the characteristics of records, their contents, and their functions within the organization, in order to preserve the information that is contained in e-mail messages. Records contain the evidential value of an organization, such as legal, fiscal, administrative, historical, cultural, and archival information about the organization.

ARMA (2000) also stated that e-mail management policy addresses business-related issues, because e-mail is indisputably an essential tool for improving productivity and communications within an organization today. Lastly, e-mail management policy must address user responsibilities regarding e-mail etiquette and compliance with e-mail policy, because e-mail is often mistakenly considered a form of ephemeral communication. Among these five perspectives, the three major ones—those related to system, legal compliance, and records management—are more likely to further our understanding of current policies and practices of e-mail management and system implementation of GoC.

4. Methodology

To examine current e-mail management of GoC at the federal level, this study collected the e-mail management policy guidelines and supporting documents that are available online from five government agencies and departments: Department of Justice Canada, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Natural Resources Canada, Public Works and Government Services Canada, and Treasury Board of Canada. The guidelines were examined by content analysis to identify the current policies and practices. This study presents the findings of the analysis with regard to the system, legal compliance, and records management.

5. E-mail management of GoC

Hummingbird Ltd. (2006) reported that in GoC, 80% of information in electronic formats remained unmanaged and stored in an unstructured manner, so that information retrieval was not available in a timely fashion. This situation resulted in a huge duplication of documentation across ministries, departments, and agencies.

5.1. System

To solve these problems, GoC needed to facilitate an operational tool for document and records management in electronic formats, encourage information sharing, and improve