Electronic Records Management:
How to Do a Bulk Email Clean-Up Project

Purpose: Provide guidance to state and local government agencies on a cost-effective and legally defensible approach to destroying a backlog of email records.

A large-scale email clean-up project can be a complex and time-consuming task. This three-phased approach is one way that agencies can clear out old email efficiently and with minimal risk.

Document everything. Agencies should document every decision made and action taken throughout each step of the project. Transparency communicates a "good faith" effort to follow records retention requirements. Thorough documentation can help mitigate risk by demonstrating that thought and planning went into the process.

Phase 1: Sampling. Examine a small sample of the email backlog to create a profile of the records you can expect to find and the range of retention periods that may apply. Improve the accuracy of the sample profile by sampling emails from different departments and different times of the year.

NOTE: Your agency's legal counsel, risk manager, and records officer should approve your sampling plan before beginning the project. Washington State Archives can provide advice and feedback as well.

Phase 2: The Search & Destroy Method. Pare down the email backlog by isolating groups of records with the same retention requirements using the profile created during the sampling phase. The retention groups can be managed in bulk instead of assigning retention to each email individually.

Divide the emails by department, unit, work group, or position to narrow down the types of emails that might exist. Agencies can use eDiscovery software to further narrow the range of emails returned during a search.

Phase 3: The Meat Cleaver Method. Once you've cleaned up what you can in the first two phases, use this method to disposition the emails left over.

Identify the longest retention of the remaining emails (hopefully this number will be something like 10 years or less). Delete emails older than that retention and assign it to the remaining emails. Then either wait for the full retention and destroy the entire backlog at once or destroy the oldest year of emails each year until the entire backlog has met its retention and been destroyed

Going forward, set up procedures for all staff to sort their own emails for retention as they work so you don't have to sort through a large backlog again.

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

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