RAMMELL Consulting

Organisational Effectiveness through Records & Information Management

Electronic Mail:
Using Outlook™ Rules to Manage Messages

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Introduction

It has been reported that the average office worker now receives some 75 electronic mail (email) messages every day. In many organisations, it is email, rather than the telephone, that is the primary means of communication. With so many incoming messages all demanding our attention, it is of no surprise that many users are struggling to manage their email accounts.

Of course, depending on how “company record” and “official record” is defined by your organisation, the vast majority of these emails are records requiring management according to approved records retention policies. It is not appropriate for emails to be left to be automatically deleted after a pre-defined period of time. Neither is it appropriate just to leave all messages in your email folders ad infinitum! A management process needs to be introduced to ensure that email messages are retained for the appropriate length of time and are well organised so that they can be retrieved rapidly when needed again.

Many email programs provide a tool which performs actions upon messages based on pre-defined rules. For the purpose of this paper we shall refer to the feature in Outlook know as “rules”. However, the principle is equally applicable to any other email program that provides the same functionality. This paper suggest a few ways in which “rules” can be used to help manage emails for the average office worker. The reader will need to determine for themselves the applicability of these examples; in most cases they can easily be modified to suit almost any workplace scenario.

Email classification

The first stage in this process is to identify how email messages should be classified. This classification serves two purposes and this needs to be remembered when defining the rules later. The first reason for classifying emails is to make it easier and more efficient for processing. Thus, classification can assist with prioritising emails; identifying emails that need action; identifying emails that do not need to be read. The second reason for classifying emails is to facilitation their disposition i.e. to comply with your records retention policy. Thus, emails that form records of the same type could be managed together.

The recommended approach is to identify a small number of email types; keep the number small to make setting up rules more manageable. The following examples can be used by most organisations:

- *General reading matter*
  Typically, the content is not particularly high priority (can be read within 5-10 days); includes
  - periodic e-newsletters (internal and external)
  - messages and digests from online bulletin boards and e-lists
  - alerts from web sites (internal and external)

- *Projects*
  The word “project” is used loosely and can include: customers; clients; departments; work projects; interests, for example. A project represents a grouping of messages that can be managed as a series for record-keeping purposes and have a feature in common such as the same subject or originator.

- *Chronological*
  This is simply managing incoming and outgoing email according to when it was sent or received.

An alternative approach is to use an existing business classification scheme or fileplan already in use within your organisation. However, with the exception of individuals that receive an extremely high volume of emails, it is usually not efficient to follow this practice. However, if it is possible to create a more simplified version of the fileplan by grouping related classes, then this may be appropriate in some circumstances.

Folder definition

It is then necessary to create folders to move messages into based upon the defined classification scheme. Remember however that it can become increasingly more difficult to locate emails if large numbers of folders are created. You should therefore be pragmatic in determining which topic areas are best combined into a single email folder and which justify having their own email folder. You could, for example, create a folder called “inactive clients” for contacts with whom you are not actively engaged but create separate folders for your 4-5 clients with whom you are working with on a more regular basis. Similarly, if you only receive an e-newsletter from ‘ABC News’ once every quarter, the email is probably best placed in a folder with other e-newsletters received on a less frequent basis. However, your daily e-newsletters may justify a folder of their own. If you are following a chronological approach, you simply create folders for each time unit that you wish to manage emails within, for example, a folder for each month of the year.

Rules definition

The next stage of the process is to define rules that move your incoming messages into the corresponding email folder. The method of creating rules differs between email software so no detail will be included in this paper; refer instead to your software Online Help if you are unsure. However, the principle is the same whatever software you are using. You need to define a set of rules that assesses each email as it is received – and each sent email as it gets sent – and re-files it in the most appropriate folder based on your selected classification scheme.

The result of using a rules-based scheme is that rather than having to review all of your incoming emails in a single Inbox, you can select which set of emails to review at the most appropriate time. If you have a high-priority project, then you can allocate time to keep an eye on that project’s folder in preference to lower priority projects. Similarly, you don’t need to be disturbed by incoming e-newsletters and general mail shots as they will automatically be directed to your ‘reading’ folder(s). Simply assign time in your diary to review those emails according to the priority that they have for your job function.

Disposition management

One of the most common problems that individuals have with regards to email management is the inability to delete emails and/or the inability to delete emails based on a consistent set of criteria. It should be stressed at the outset that any rules to delete messages must be in compliance with your organisation's records retention policy. The establishment of automated disposition rules that contravene these policies or any legal holds in place is extremely serious and **must** be avoided.

Having defined a set of email folders based on subjects/topics, it is now fairly straight-forward to set up retention rules that are appropriate to the content. For example, you could set up a rule on your reading folder (using the Archive function) that automatically deletes messages that are older than 10 days. If you need to keep reference material longer, then create a sub-folder named 'Reference Material' with a longer retention time.

Disposition rules can either delete emails after a set time period or move messages to a set of archive folders (if your organisation permits the creation of archive folders). Care should be taken not to move messages to archive folders unless they really need to be retained. It is all too easy to automatically archive emails only to create a set of archive folders containing tens of thousands of emails that are unmanageable. The most practical solution is to create a set of folders into which emails may be moved temporarily for a period of say 6-12 months, during which they are still relatively accessible.... some might call this a pre-archive. At the end of a defined period, the folders are then either deleted or formally archived if long-term retention is appropriate.

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