



Recorded Information Management

“You Have 53 Old Archived Messages ...”: What to do About Voice Mail

Voice mail is a convenient communications tool whose use is growing rapidly in the Ontario Government. Many staff, however, are unsure whether, and for how long, they should keep their messages. Most voice mail messages are of temporary interest, but some convey important information about government business activities. Sometimes, a voice mail message is the only record of a significant business decision or transaction.

This Fact Sheet outlines key issues and provides advice concerning the management and disposal of voice mail messages.

Are voice mail messages “records”?

Most voice mail messages are *not* official records and should be deleted after the message has been heard. These messages include:

- Communications about routine administrative matters (“The 10:00 o’clock meeting will be in Boardroom B,” “This is Bill Smith calling...could you please call me back,” “Your photocopy order is ready.”)
- Personal messages (“Are you free for lunch?,” “Remember, it’s your turn to pick up Jennifer at day care.”)

After you have listened to the message, delete it. This keeps your voice mailbox from filling up and speeds access to new messages. It also helps save the government money on new voice mail equipment.

Some of my voice mail messages are really important, however.

Yes, and a few of them are official records. Voice-mail constitutes an official record when the message conveys important information about government business activities or transactions, for example:

- When it records official decisions about important matters;
- When it records or communicates significant comment or detail about policies, programs and program delivery;
- When it deals with an issue with significant financial or legal importance to the ministry or agency;
- When it contains key background information which may be used to develop important government documents such as studies, reports and position papers;
- When it records a serious complaint by the public or by other government staff.

The difference between official records and temporary records is discussed in more detail in Fact Sheet #8 (*“The Fine Art of Destruction: Weeding out ‘Transitory’ Records”*)

What should I do with important messages?

You should retain the message for as long as it has value. Press “9” on your phone to “archive” it. Most voice mail systems are not intended for long-term storage of messages, however; so periodically check your stored messages to decide if some or all of them can be deleted.

If a very important message needs to be stored indefinitely, you may want to summarise (or transcribe) the contents so that a more permanent and accessible record of the issue is created. Identify the name and title of the caller, the date and time of the message, the date and time the transcription or summary was made and who made it. File a paper or electronic copy of the summary or transcription with other files relating to the program, client or activity. After you have done this, you can delete the voice mail message.

Be sure that the original message no longer needs to be kept. Once you delete a message, it’s gone forever.

What if the message is important, but the call should have gone to someone else?

Forward the voice mail to the appropriate person. You may want to note down when and to whom you forwarded the message, in case you need the information later. In general, it is best to avoid leaving or forwarding personal, proprietary or confidential information on voice mail. If you must forward this kind of information, however, make certain the person to whom you are sending the message is the appropriate one to receive it.

That sounds like I should think about privacy issues.

Yes, it’s an important issue whenever you are dealing with any kind of record that may contain personal information, whether paper, computer or voice mail. For example, if the voice mail message contains personal information about the caller or about another identifiable person (as many messages do), then the message should not be shared with someone who does not have a right to access that information. This applies to messages both from other government staff and

from members of the public. Your voice mail system allows you to forward a message so that it can be accessed only by the person to whom you are sending it.

The Information and Privacy Commissioner's Office has issued a guideline specifically dealing with privacy and confidentiality issues related to voice mail. It can be requested from them or accessed on their WEB site at http://www.ipc.on.ca/web_site.ups/matters/sum_pap/papers/vmail-e.htm

So remember...

Like e-mail, voice mail messages are used for an increasing variety of business communications. Although most voice mail messages do not need to be kept after they have been listened to, some should be retained because of the important information they contain. As a rule of thumb, key decisions and other important information should be documented and communicated in written form -- whether paper or electronic -- rather than by voice messages.

Having trouble using voice mail? Instructions for using the features of your voice mail system are available from your ministry or agency Telephone Co-ordinator. You should review this information if needed to maximize the benefit of voice mail to you and your callers.

*For more information about this **Fact Sheet**, contact the **Archives of Ontario Policy Unit** at **(416)327-1568** or **(416)327-1570** or rim@archives.gov.on.ca*