



Federal institutions increasingly rely on cloud-based platforms, mobile applications, instant messaging tools and decentralized communication channels to deliver programs and services. Institutions must treat any platform used for government business as a potential source of responsive records because all responsive records must be retrieved if they exist at the time an access request is received.

Effective email and instant message management is essential to transparency, accountability and compliance with access to information obligations. Within the Government of Canada, email, chat and text messages are not just communications—they are records that may document decisions, actions and public business. Poor information management practices can undermine access rights and impede timely responses to access requests.

The following tips contain best practices that may help you comply with your obligations under the *Access to Information Act*. You may also wish to review the [Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat's guidance](#) on information management.





1 Write email subject lines that clearly describe the contents of the message

Clear, descriptive subject lines in emails aren't just a courtesy; they directly support access to information obligations and sound recordkeeping. When subject lines accurately reflect content, Access to Information and Privacy (ATIP) analysts can triage records more efficiently. This reduces the time necessary to process the records and lowers the risk that responsive records are missed.

Also, a good subject line signals what the message is about—decision, briefing, approval, issue, file (with file number)—making it easier to interpret the record in isolation, especially when emails are extracted from their original thread during a disclosure under the Act.





2 Document decisions promptly and properly retain records in an official repository so they are easy to retrieve

If the information is under the [control of an institution](#), it is subject to the Act, regardless of where it is stored or how it was created. The use of multiple communication and storage environments (e.g. departmental email, non-government accounts, collaboration platforms and corporate repositories) fragments information. This increases the risk of incomplete disclosures.





3 Retrieve all records that are responsive at the time an access request is received and provide them to your ATIP unit promptly

Most digital collaboration platforms support rapid and informal exchanges (e.g. chat platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Slack and Signal) that are not systematically captured in official repositories. Some platforms permit auto-deletion or temporary messaging.

Institutions must ensure that they have the means to identify, retrieve and produce records including transitory records, from all repositories (official or not) and across all environments in which government business is conducted.





4 Delete transitory records unless they are relevant to an access request that has been received or is expected

When inboxes, chats and other channels are cluttered with transitory messages, the records that truly document decisions or actions become harder to identify. Also, reviewing unnecessarily large volumes of information in response to an access request significantly increases the workload for ATIP units, which can lead to delays and undermine timely access.

However, if a [transitory record](#) that is relevant to an access request has not yet been disposed of at the time the request is received, it must be treated as any other document and processed as part of the request.





5 Understand your ATIP responsibilities, take training and apply what you learn

ATIP responsibilities are not confined to specialists; they are shared across the institution. Attend training sessions offered by your institution's information management and ATIP professionals. Understand how to conduct a [reasonable search](#), support timely responses, and work with the ATIP unit to meet your institution's obligations under the Act. When employees know and do what is expected of them (e.g. how to respond to taskings), ATIP units can process requests more efficiently.

