



## Introduction

Electronic mail was the first Internet “killer application.” Ask people what they do first when they connect to the Internet, and most of them will answer, “Check my email.” Most organizations consider email to be a critical communications channel, as important as or even more important than the telephone or physical mail. Consequently, to maintain an email service as a robust and effective means of communication, organizations need to take the administration of their email systems seriously.

We can divide the tasks required to properly maintain an email service into two distinct types of roles: the email administrator and the postmaster. Many times, these two functions are performed by the same person or people, but in larger organizations they may be split out into separate roles, or may even be subdivided further.

We consider the role of the email administrator to be to perform the technical tasks necessary to keep the email service functioning properly. Such duties include, but are not limited to, ensuring that the service is up and accessible, keeping email queues clear, and maintaining and updating the service’s hardware and software.

On the other hand, we consider the postmaster role to include the personal interactions and policy work that surround the email service. These duties are as important as those of the email administrator, but they are less often discussed in the system administration literature. The purpose of this booklet is to discuss these roles and provide some suggestions on the best current practices (BCP) for those who hold postmaster positions for Internet-connected organizations.

We don’t know for certain when the term “postmaster” was first used as it applies to electronic mail. The first mention of this term in this context that we could find is in section 6.3 of RFC 822, “Standard for the Format of ARPA Internet Text Messages” [Crocke82]. This document requires that every domain should have a mailbox called “postmaster.” The RFC goes on to specify that the user portion of the “postmaster” email address must be case insensitive and should be read by someone who is responsible for the domain’s email service. Further, it specifies that this is the proper channel for inquiries regarding problems in email communication with that domain. As far as we’re concerned, this is the origin of the postmaster role, and the term’s definition extends from the notion that the postmaster is the person who reads an email server’s postmaster mailbox.

## **What This Booklet Is About**

This booklet suggests guidelines for defining the duties and responsibilities of the postmaster at various types of Internet-connected sites. The words “duties” and “responsibilities” in the title of this booklet have been chosen carefully by the authors. The role of the postmaster encompasses tasks that must be conscientiously performed at regular intervals to satisfy the demands of one’s customer base and ethical obligations both to one’s customers and to the Internet community.

The specifics of these duties and responsibilities can vary depending on the exact nature of the organization in question. Even among organizations of similar type and purpose, we would expect that the job functions of the postmaster can vary considerably. This booklet will explore some of the disparate aspects of this position, but each organization will have to determine which of the suggestions included here are most appropriate for adoption in their particular circumstances.

One of the difficulties in being postmaster is reconciling conflicts between the duties and the responsibilities of this position. It is by no means trivial to balance the objectives of the organization with the ethical obligations called for by the position. These sorts of conflicts are never easy to resolve, and no document can cover these situations exhaustively, but we hope that this booklet will help to place some of the situations that each postmaster faces in a useful context.

## **Future Relevance**

The duties and responsibilities of the Internet postmaster have changed dramatically over the past 25 years, and we see no reason to think that this role won’t continue to change as the Internet evolves. The authors believe that the suggestions made in this document represent the consensus of the industry’s best current practices for postmasters. Just as we believe that what would be considered BCP has changed over the past few decades, we recognize that BCP in the future will likely be quite different as well. Therefore, as the Internet and email service evolve, we’re confident that some of the specific suggestions made in this booklet will need to be adjusted.

Even now, the situations faced by postmasters at distinct sites may render suggestions that are perfectly valid for one organization inappropriate for another. Nothing we say here serves as a replacement for the judgment of an experienced postmaster who has a thorough understanding of the circumstances surrounding their particular situation.

This is an issue we have had to deal with as we reviewed the older Internet RFCs. Many of these documents have not been updated to reflect a time in which spam and email-borne malware are commonplace. Consequently, in order to adapt the valuable principles contained in these earlier documents we must attempt to divine the intent of the authors and successfully adjust them to our present circumstances. We expect that not everyone will completely agree with our recommendations on how best to do this.

## **Things This Booklet Does Not Cover**

While this booklet covers many aspects of email service and operation, there are two areas that we specifically do not intend to cover. We feel it is worthwhile to explicitly list those here in case the reader becomes distracted by their absence later on.

While this booklet does discuss the legal aspects of postmaster duties, we do not provide legal advice. Although we have significant experience supporting email services, neither of us has any specific expertise in legal matters. Further, legal regulation on this topic is so dynamic and so location-dependent that any attempt to capture its state would be futile.

In this book we point out some areas in which postmasters may become embroiled in legal issues, but we do not want to suggest specific resolutions to these issues. Instead, the person who encounters these situations in the postmaster role should seek out advice from legal professionals who understand the specific situation in which any particular organization finds itself. In fact, we strongly recommend that those in the postmaster role should initiate and maintain a dialogue with an organization's legal counsel in order to help stave off such problems before they occur.

Another set of topics that will not be covered in this booklet is that of solutions to problems postmasters are likely to face based on specific email software. Each of these almost certainly has several books, Web sites, and other information sources available that discuss how to resolve implementation issues. Consequently, there's no way we could do justice to the many platforms that exist in a document of this size, so we won't even try. This booklet focuses on making qualitative suggestions to postmasters. We'll leave the task of making implementation suggestions for email administrators to other sources.

At times, we will refer to the documentation related to a specific software solution or methodology, but only if that source has something relevant to say about providing email services that is more general than the solution endorsed by that particular platform. Nothing we say here should be construed as endorsement or condemnation of any specific electronic mail solution.