

How to guide

How to establish a policy on whether to offer a company email address to public contributors

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Introduction

A member of the public who regularly offers advice and help to health services and research organisations asked if he could be assigned a 'company' email address. This paper brings together what we have found out in trying to decide how to respond. It was drafted by Peter Bates on behalf of the [East Midlands Academic Health Science Network](http://www.emahsn.org.uk) as part of its work on Public Leadership. Several people have contributed ideas¹, but further opinion, references and suggestions for improvement are very welcome.

Please contact shahnaz.aziz@nottingham.ac.uk to suggest improvements or tell us how you have made use of this paper.

¹ The following people kindly responded to an inquiry about this issue: Jennifer Allison, Jill Anderson, Roni Anthony, Shahnaz Aziz, Gillian Baker, Paul Balm, Megan Barlow-Pay, Duncan Barron, Debbie Bierne, Kate Boddy, Toby Brandon, Douglas Briggs, Sue Cavill, Trish Cargill, Ann Davis, Rosie Davies, Hildegard Dumper, Paul Gardner, Justine Hill, Adele Horobin, Glen Howard, Sandre Jones, Paul Kennedy, Rory King, Ian Kingsbury, Martin Lodemore, Lynne Maddocks, Fiona McKenzie, Alex Mendoza, Ruth Parry, James Pearson, Maggie Peat, Sophie Petit-Zeman, Vanessa Pinfold, Julia Simister, Lucy Simons, Sam Smith, Susan Smith, Kate Sonpal, Cathie Stokes, Heidi Surridge, Eileen Sutton, Doreen Tembo, David Waldram, Tim Weaver, Justin Wilson, Jonathan Wright.

What is a company email address?

It is simply an email address that identifies the organisation where the person is involved. Most commonly, this would be an address that ends with .nhs.uk or .nhs.net (if it is an NHS organisation) or .ac.uk (if it is a University)

A note on language and the reach of this paper

In this paper, the term:

- *Public contributor* means a patient, service user, carer or member of the public who brings their lived experience of using health services to help improve services and research.

Why offer a company email address?

At first sight, this seems unnecessary, as people have an email address already, and any address is as good as any other. Few organisations actually make the offer, but it is not clear whether this is as a result of a definite decision, or simply inaction on this agenda. However, the following reasons have been given for offering a company email address:

- According to [research](#) by the Office of National Statistics, over 7 million Britons have never been online, and this may include some of the people we are trying to reach. However, this may not be the best way to meet this need².
- Targeted work to reach seldom heard groups will need to address barriers to participation, which may include the lack of internet access.
- The company email is seen as a 'benefit in kind' that acknowledges and rewards the recipient for their contribution³.
- The company address confers credibility⁴.

² At the University of Nottingham, for example, a new associate must have a non-university email account already. This is used to receive and confirm acceptance of the university's terms and conditions before they are provided with an associate account.

³ While government policy recognises the value of giving [reward and recognition](#) to people who contribute their time and skills in a voluntary capacity, care is needed when spending public funds in order to achieve private benefit.

⁴ For a brief discussion on what your email address says about you, see <http://lifehacker.com/5447335/know-what-your-email-address-says-about-you>

- Email messages that are sent internally within an organisation are less likely to be treated as spam (one person's job application was diverted to the spam inbox)
- Recipients sometimes refuse to accept bookings or question the validity of the message if it comes from an email address that does not look official.
- The company email address acts as a gateway to other internal resources held by the company, such as online room bookings or intranet services within the company. Where public contributors are attending meetings, teaching class or making other contributions, access to this information is eased. In addition, the person will receive news bulletins and other messages sent by internal email to all staff.
- The company email address may act as a gateway to other external resources. For example, Apple offers a discount to anyone with a .ac.uk email address.
- Company email addresses sometimes can allow information to be transmitted securely and a company email account ensures that the message does not leave the organisation.
- The company has the ability to deactivate the account and so increase data security, whereas it would be impractical to ensure that a privately held address was removed from all address books and distribution lists.
- It reduces the number of differences between staff who have lived experience and public contributors – but some people want to retain the distinction between staff and public contributors.

Why do some people reject the idea?

There are a variety of reasons why some organisations and individuals reject the idea of public contributors holding a company email address. These include:

- The Universities and Research Council's email networks (called JANET⁵) is not generally accessible to the general public and therefore, under UK law is considered to be a private network rather than a commercial internet service provider (ISP). Commercial ISPs have substantial additional responsibilities for network filtering, monitoring and logging in

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/JANET>

comparison to the Janet system. Offering an account to public contributors may be viewed as providing accounts to the general public and thus subject the organisation to commercial ISP regulations⁶.

- Some companies have contracts with IT and academic resource providers that specifically oblige them to only provide access to services, software and other resources to legitimate academic staff and students. Failure to do so represents a contractual breach that would lead to either financial penalties or forfeit of contractual services. The volunteers you describe below are likely to fall outside of the generally accepted definitions of legitimate users.
- It is a rare request and many people told us that they have never been asked about this before.
- People who hold more than one email address often favour one account and neglect the others, forget their password and miss important correspondence.
- Access to a company email address may come with an online calendar function, leading to calendar sharing. Public contributors are more likely to share personal diary matters, unhelpfully blurring the boundary between work and personal life for anyone who sees the calendar entries.
- Company email addresses are only provided to employees with substantive contracts. Other organisations provide a formal Associate or honorary contract option to structure all their casual arrangements. For anyone else, the organisation has insufficient sanctions available to enable them to direct and regulate behaviour and this places the organisation at risk.
- While some email addresses are web-based and so can be accessed from anywhere with an internet connection, other company email addresses have been configured so that they can only be accessed from computers that belong to the organisation concerned, or under special arrangements from elsewhere. These special arrangements insist on encrypted connections, can be costly and may again be limited to equipment owned by the company. This enables the company to ensure

⁶ There is some small discretion here. JANET does have policies that allow for “community engagement” which would allow the creation of associate accounts for temporary and intermittent use. When such arrangements become more substantial, there is a chance that they would be viewed as a “network service to the general public”. Individual organisations within the JANET network may take a varying approach to these competing issues.

that appropriate safeguards are in place such as up-to-date virus protection, encryption, updates and other security features.

- Staff may worry that public contributors may bring the organisation into disrepute and public contributors worry that their independence will be perceived as compromised.
- The professional bodies that regulate the conduct of health and social care staff have generally adopted more stringent requirements concerning the use of social media than are commonly adopted amongst the general public. Bringing public contributors into the orbit of online communication may lead to competing expectations and compromise staff in maintaining the high standards expected of them.
- Information Governance procedures may prevent people with no formal contract of employment from having a company email. Where public contributors are expected to adhere to local policies, these may be placed and updated on the company's intranet, which may not be accessible to the public contributor.
- There may not be a robust system in place to monitor use of emails and to close down accounts when people step down from their role.
- There is no need, as other email addresses do the job, and the public contributor could even set up their own dedicated email address for their involvement activities if they wished to keep it separate from other communications.
- Additional accounts may incur licensing costs, take up the scarce time of the IT helpdesk or use valuable places on training courses.

Nine Steps

1. Start by finding out what forms of communication are popular in the group you wish to engage with, rather than just assume that email is the appropriate medium. Some young people, for example, may prefer WhatsApp or texts, middle aged people like Facebook, and some older people may not use online media at all. Alternatively, an online shared workspace may be more useful than email.
2. Then check out how people use this communication medium. For example, some people may want a company email address so that they can choose when to look at them and create a healthy work/life balance.

In contrast, staff may expect an immediate response to their message, so negotiating and managing expectations will be important.

3. Check with your company's IT support and information governance leads to locate existing policies, obtain advice and identify appropriate support for your arrangements. Ensure that your plans do not break any law or contractual obligations.
4. The offer should be confined to those who have a recognised need for the email address *and* where there is benefit for the organisation, not just the person. This is partly because the organisation usually pays a licence fee for internet access and library use which is proportionate to the number of users.
5. Take a proportionate approach to checking that the individual is a 'fit and proper person'⁷. If they are handling highly confidential information or working with children or vulnerable adults, then it may be appropriate to incur the expense of a DBS check to find out about the person's criminal background, and the person is likely to need an honorary contract and all the safeguards this entails. For others, asking for a self-declaration would be sufficient, or simply seeing the person in a variety of settings and over a period of time would provide enough reassurance about their motives and behaviours.
6. Mobile devices that are used to access the email address must have the same antivirus software security loaded on to them as equipment belonging to the company. Public contributors have the same obligations as staff for maintaining safety, responsible use, and for upholding the reputation of the organisation.
7. An authorisation and oversight mechanism is needed that will enable the email address to be closed down by the organisation when necessary. As with casual staff and contractors, this is normally done by activating the account for a fixed term, such as six months, and then asking the manager to confirm each time it needs to be renewed. Such authorisation may commonly only be given by a permanent member of staff.

⁷ This phrase is used by the UK government, where it particularly relates to the integrity of individuals who manage charities. Such managers must be free of any history of fraud, identity theft, misrepresentation or attempts to avoid statutory responsibilities such as paying tax. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/charities-fit-and-proper-persons-test/guidance-on-the-fit-and-proper-persons-test>. We are using the phrase here to acknowledge that not everyone would be a suitable candidate for a company email address.

8. Gateway access via the email address to other resources (printing, intranet, room bookings, library facilities etc) should be on a stepped approach, so that people obtain the level of access they need and no more and other information remains confidential, especially any patient identifiable data. Of course this opens up a series of alternative arrangements, such as offering people access to the internet without an email account.
9. An alternative to providing a personal email address for each individual is to provide an email address that could be used by a group of people, and this has the advantage of remaining unchanged when individuals move on to other activities. However, this arrangement weakens security by sharing the password, removing personal responsibility and inhibiting audit, so is generally discouraged.

| Risks | Mitigation |
|--|--|
| The email address may give public contributors inappropriate access to confidential information. | All staff and public contributors should sign up to a set of Terms and Conditions which includes maintaining confidentiality and only using the email address for acceptable purposes. This contract should place similar obligations on public contributors as are required of employees. This will enable the organisation to apply agreed sanctions and exercise its indemnity if the account is used inappropriately and the organisation is fined by the Information Commissioner's Office. |
| To claim an unwarranted authority | Agree to use a disclaimer at the foot of each message giving a clear indication of the identity and status of the author – see below |

| Risks | Mitigation |
|---|---|
| To use the company email address to imply an endorsement of other activities (such as where the person is both a public contributor and runs a business) | Some public contributors have many different roles and links with a variety of organisations. Each situation will be different. A clear conversation and a file note may be needed to ensure that the reputation of the company is not exploited in this way. |
| To masquerade as a staff member | Provide access to policies and training on the email system and other online resources, which may need to be refreshed from time to time, in line with the expectations on staff. Ask volunteers to add their role to their online name (e.g. John Smith - volunteer), rather than just use their name. |
| People not considered to be 'fit and proper persons' obtain a company email address | Restrict the offer to people who have been known to the organisation for 6-12 months, have a DBS check and have a sponsor within the organisation. |
| Inappropriate content (such as abusive, explicit violent or sexual content) will be sent out associated with the organisation | Both outgoing and incoming emails are screened, thus reducing this risk in comparison to using other email addresses |
| Other agencies may infer from the company email address that the public contributor is an employee and so refuse claims for participation fees and expenses | Explain that company email addresses are sometimes offered to public contributors who are not in receipt of a salary |

| Risks | Mitigation |
|---|---|
| The person may be offered a company email address but no technical support to help them use it or solve technical problems that arise, leading to disuse and frustration. | Ensure that the person has appropriate access to IT support and general supervision, so that they can highlight problems as they arise. |

Disclaimer

One organisation uses the following statement:

“This e-mail may contain confidential and privileged material for the sole use of the intended recipient. Any review, use, distribution or disclosure by others is strictly prohibited. If you are not the intended recipient (or authorised to receive for the recipient), please contact the sender by reply e-mail and delete all copies of this message. [Company name and the address of its registered office]. Please consider your carbon footprint and our environment and don't print this email if you don't have to.”

Examples

1. The [University of Nottingham](#) has established [arrangements](#) for approving certain people as Associates, and then giving them access to the IT system. Emeritus professors, contractors, casual staff, visiting lecturers and others may become an Associate, but not public contributors. the guidance does not explicitly mention public contributors⁸.
2. The [University of the West of England](#) registers patient researchers as Associates, and this enables them to hold a company email address. Members of the public who are involved at UWE can obtain an email address, swipe card and access to the Library. This is offered to specific people who have an agreed role and relationship, and people receive an

⁸ Paul Kennedy, Security Architect at the University of Nottingham has explained that the University has specific categories which do not include public contributors. Changing this would require policy to be revised and arrangements with IT and academic service providers would need to be renegotiated (email 13 July 2015).

individual letter setting out their responsibilities. Some members of the public prefer to use their personal emails.

3. [Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust](#) has an established system for providing email addresses to people who are sponsored by the Involvement Centre. The IT Department process applications within five working days. Whilst most people handle the opportunity very responsibly, the Trust expects that a few people will have difficulties, and manage this by (a) not introducing too much bureaucracy but rather focusing on a personal working relationship between the sponsor and the public contributor, and (b) anticipating that a tiny proportion of people will not use this opportunity well (they are a mental health trust after all), and managing risks proportionately.
4. The [McPin Foundation](#) has a group email address that public contributors share, as does [NIHR Wellcome Trust Southampton Clinical Research Facility](#).
5. [NHSMail](#) offers an encryption facility which means it can be used to send and receive encrypted email from any computer provided that the recipient signs up for the encryption service. [Guidance](#) is available, although the decisions on whether to admit public contributors may be made by a local NHS organisation.
6. NHS.net is sometimes used by non-executive directors and governors, and perhaps others.