

Strategies to Maintain Institutional Continuity When Employees Depart Stony Brook University

A report by the University Senate Committee
on Educational Services and Information Technology (SCEDIT)

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JUSTIFICATION AND HISTORY

As Stony Brook University has transitioned to a largely paperless campus, IT resources such as email archives and online file storage have become critical repositories of institutional memory. As employees depart the University, preserving and conveying this information to new stewards is critical to maintaining operational continuity and efficiency.

At its meeting of December 12, 2023, the University Senate Committee on Educational Services and Information Technology (SCEDIT) authorized the formation of a working group to investigate the efficacy of processes intended to maintain institutional continuity when employees depart the University.

The four members of the working group (Campbell, Eisenberg, Hollander, and Wilson) wish to thank Simeon Ananou, Vice President for Information Technology and Chief Information Officer and Michael Ospitale Assistant Vice President of Customer Engagement and Support for their assistance. Our positive and proactive working relationship over the past several months is an excellent example of shared governance at work.

This report will summarize findings and recommendations with respect to Google Apps for Education. Time did not permit a similar detailed examination for Microsoft 365, but the working group recommends similar policies, strategies, and resources be available for those users as well.

EMAIL AUTORESPONDERS AND AUTOFORWARDS

Absent other arrangements, when a faculty or staff member departs SBU, their NetID is deactivated within 24 hours. Email to the departed person then bounces back to the sender with the message:

----- The following addresses had permanent fatal errors -----

john.smith@my.stonybrook.edu

(reason: 550-5.2.1 The email account that you tried to reach is inactive. Learn more at)

(expanded from: <john.smith@stonybrook.edu>)

Before they depart, John Smith can set up an autoresponder, so an incoming email would result in the sender receiving a message directing them appropriately:

John Smith has retired from Stony Brook University. Please direct communications regarding Student Financial Aid to Jane Doe by email to jane.doe@stonybrook.edu or telephone to 631-632-6840.

The procedure for setting up an autoresponder is documented at:

<https://support.google.com/mail/answer/25922?hl=en&co=GENIE.Platform%3DDesktop>

Alternatively, John Smith could set up an autofoward, where all incoming email is automatically forwarded to Jane Doe. The procedure for setting up an autofoward is documented at:

<https://support.google.com/mail/answer/10957?hl=en#zippy=>

Important caveat #1: neither autoresponders or autoforwards survive a person's departure from Stony Brook without the person's account being set for "extended access."

The departing person must request extended access for their account by sending an email to Computer Accounts <caccount@stonybrook.edu> or submitting a ticket through the DoIT Service Portal at <https://it.stonybrook.edu/services/itsm>

Important caveat #2: "extended access" only refers to extended functionality of the account and does not give the departed person any access after leaving Stony Brook.

A request for extended access must also be approved by the Department Chair (or equivalent) and must state the length of time for extended access.

Current DoIT policy is to encourage extended access for a period of weeks to a couple of months, which in the opinion of the working group is not long enough. Access for a person who has been here for decades may need to be in place for much longer. The working group's recommendation is that the Department Chair be able to request extended access for up to one year and that such access be renewable based on demonstration of need, with a reminder sent one month before extended access expires.

ACCESS TO EMAIL ARCHIVES

Before departing Stony Brook, John Smith can choose to delegate their email account to another person, in the same fashion that an administrator allows email access to an administrative assistant:

<https://support.google.com/mail/answer/138350?hl=en#zippy=%2Cadd-a-delegate>

Note that as with autoresponders and autoforwards, “extended access” is required for email delegation to continue past a person’s departure date.

The person to whom the email account is delegated can reply to emails. The account owner can set up delegation so that the email states the sender - i.e. Email from John Doe, sent by Jane Smith. Note that the person to whom the email account is delegated can also delete archived emails.

A shared mailbox is a relatively recent Gmail feature that may be appropriate to build a shared email archive for a laboratory, work group, service unit, organization, or department:

<https://it.stonybrook.edu/help/kb/setting-up-departmental-shared-mailboxes>

IF A PERSON HAS ALREADY DEPARTED STONY BROOK OR IS ON LEAVE AND MAY NOT BE CONTACTED

If the employee is no longer with the department or University, or is on a form of leave where the University is not permitted to contact them, a request to place an autoresponder, autoforward, or email account delegation can be made by anyone to Computer Accounts or through the DoIT service portal. Depending on a person's status, it also may be necessary to request extended access to the account. The head of the department, University Counsel, and Human Resources must review and approve the request. The head of the department must state who is getting access to what information, for how long the access will be needed, and the reasoning for the request. Lack of information/clarity provided from the department will generally cause the request to be denied or delayed by University Counsel and Human Resources.

Reasons for denial include:

- The person is still with the University but in a different area/department.
- A legal hold is in place for the former employee's account.
- There is insufficient justification for requesting access.

ACCESS TO GOOGLE DRIVE

Google Drive has always had the ability to share files between individual users. A more recent feature is the “Shared Drive,” which has multiple users and managers. Moving content to a Shared Drive is an effective and recommended strategy for sharing content, but the reorganization does require effort.

A greater challenge is moving content shared to an active account to a Shared Drive when the files are owned by someone who is no longer at the University. At present, the only way to move those files seems to be to download them from the active account and then upload them to the shared drive. This can be very time consuming. The working group recommends that DoIT investigate whether some automated process could make a copy of Google Drive files shared with an active account that are owned by a person who has departed SBU, with ownership of the copies assigned to the active account. This would allow the active account’s owner to more quickly reorganize the content or transfer it to a Shared Drive.

AFFILIATE STATUS

Affiliate status can be an effective strategy for retiring professionals, graduating graduate students, and others to maintain IT resources for a period of time to aid in transition. Affiliate status is a Human Resources procedure that is initiated by the department, but “extended access” should also be requested through DoIT so that incoming emails do not bounce during the transition period between active employment and affiliate status.

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

While IT resources of faculty, staff, and graduate students are retained indefinitely, those of undergraduate students are deleted after 180 days. This makes it especially important that research data, analysis, reports, programs, etc. generated by undergraduate students that may be of future use to a project or lab are not just shared on Google Drive but moved/copied to a Shared Drive so that the files do not disappear six months later.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of recommendations made by the working group:

1. Extended access: When authorizing extended access on an account, the Department Chair should be able to request access for up to one year and that such access should be renewable based on demonstration of need, with a reminder sent one month before extended access expires.
2. Information on the need for extended access and the procedures for requesting it should be added to the web page “Leaving Stony Brook?” at: <https://it.stonybrook.edu/pages/leaving-stony-brook>
3. DoIT should investigate whether some automated process could make a copy of Google Drive files shared with an active account that are owned by a person who has departed SBU, with ownership of the copies assigned to the active account. This would allow an active account’s owner to more quickly reorganize the content or transfer it to a Shared Drive.
4. A section on affiliate status as a transition strategy, especially for graduating graduate students and retiring professionals, should also be added to the “Leaving Stony Brook?” web page.