This thesis examines published literature concerning electronic mail (E-mail) from a wide variety of sources, to assist archivists in: i) determining the feasibility of acquiring legacy electronic mail systems; ii) identifying technological trends that may either challenge or promote the archival management of the records produced by E-mail systems in the future.

A historical perspective of E-mail systems development is adopted that analyzes the evolution of its hardware, software, network architecture, communications, data transmission and message handling components. This greatly assists archival appraisal because it provides a means to understand the somewhat bewildering array of E-mail systems based on quite distinct messaging architectures that produce markedly different types of records. It also serves as a contextual framework for identifying the major trends in systems development that hold out great promise – and challenges – for the corporate recordkeeping and records management.

An evolutionary view of E-mail systems technology development is also essential for the critical analysis of media and social science research into this form of communication, most of which have not been assayed by the archival literature. While recent research provides valuable insights into the impact of E-mail systems on organizations about which archivists and other information specialists should be cognisant, earlier findings have become timeworn in the wake of new advancements in E-mail development. Yet, these findings continue to be widely held. This thesis identifies certain aspects of E-mail technologies requiring further study and research by archivists and other information specialists.