

Spark apologises after man's Xtra Mail blunder loses 30 years of family tree research

By [Chris Keall](#) 19 Apr, 2024 0757 AM

Tech veteran Phil Sheehan says it took Spark three weeks to respond to his query - and he still wants questions answered.

Former IBM cloud computing executive Phil Sheehan has a message for others leaving Spark's Xtra Mail, the formerly free web mail service that will incur a \$5.95 per month fee for those who want to stay after May 16.

"Don't do what I did!"

In a LinkedIn post, the tech industry veteran said, "I am my family's resident genealogist. For nearly 50 years, I have been accumulating family history and stories in anecdotal, paper and digital forms.

"For almost 30 of those years, I have been an Xtra Mail customer, diligently saving much of my research and correspondence in a family history email folder. Effectively, I was using Xtra as a cloud storage service, well before that term became popular. Xtra was managing multiple megabytes of my family tree content for most of the time I had been an Xtra customer.

"And then the unthinkable happened."

Sheehan recounted that as he tried to move his Xtra emails to Microsoft Outlook, he clicked "Move Folder" at one point when he should have clicked "Import/Export."

Decades of emails were gone, and neither Spark nor behind-the-scenes Xtra partner SMX could help him get them back.

"I trusted my email provider to have an efficient and effective backup and recovery process. Oh how wrong I was!" wrote Sheehan, who has also held roles at tech firms 9Spokes, Trade Window and Ingram Micro before retiring last year.

After three weeks of "frustration levels go through the roof", he finally got a response from Spark support via a chat account.

It wasn't worth the wait. "I came to the realisation that while Xtra possibly do backups of their email data, they cannot do a recovery of an individual mailbox," Sheehan wrote. Decades of family tree research, and other emails, were lost.

Spark responds

The Herald asked Spark for comment.

"We apologise for the poor customer experience Phil has received from our team, and we will improve our processes to ensure we can respond more quickly and effectively to these types of concerns in the future," a spokeswoman said.

"Unfortunately, we are not able to recover Phil's emails due to the fact he moved them off the platform.

"While customers can regain access to their Xtra Mail within 90 days of their account being closed, we are unable to recover data that has been moved off our platform by a customer.

"We understand emails can hold important information and recommend that customers refer to our help page with instructions on how to back-up emails for safekeeping – this can be found [here](#)."

Sheehan said he found the telco's response "staggering" He was incredulous that the telco did not have a backup of his individual mailbox. He continued to be frustrated he could not reach anyone at Spark to discuss his issues.

Brought home

Spark originally launched Xtra Mail as part of an early 1990s partnership with Yahoo! But after a series of security, outage and spam issues, it switched to the NZ-based, Sam Morganbacked SMX in 2016.

In March this year, the telco said free Xtra Mail was no longer financially sustainable. From May 16, it would cost Spark broadband customers \$5.95 per month and others \$9.95 per month.

The spokeswoman said: "We would also like to clarify that customers who choose to close their Xtra Mail will not be charged a disconnection fee and will only be charged until the end of the subscription month they cancel in."

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