A method for indicating titles in email addresses

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Summary

Syntax can be introduced into the hitherto free-form local part (bit before the @) of an email address in order to indicate role or qualification. The man-in-the-street can more easily configure this parameter than other aspects of their email setup. Five types of 'title' are specified which reflect different ways in which titles of various sorts are awarded and policed.

Introduction

Email addresses are now universally formed of two parts separated by an @ symbol. This roughly translates as 'mailbox at domain'. (RFC 822 6.2.4. refers to the mailbox specification as "The local-part of an addr-spec".) This may be formed of normal alphabetic and numeric characters and some other characters such as for example "=" and "!" but not "." or "(".

As email becomes ubiquitous people want to apply titles of various sorts to their email addresses so that for example instead of plain peterfox@some.domain.uk 'Professor' or 'Hero of the people class II' or 'Assistant to registrar' or 'Sailing Club member' might be an informative and respectful addition. There are two separate issues with doing this:
> 1 - Standardisation of grammar
> 2 - Authority and interpretation

Mailbox syntax

(Here we are concerned only with the bit before the @.)
- Titles shall be optional, but where used shall follow the usual name.
- A separator shall precede each title. The type of title being indicated by the type of the separator.
- The following table indicates the types of title and separators used

Sep.	Meaning	How defined
=	Role	by domain owner
==	Formal qualification	via national mechanisms
=!	Honour	via national mechanisms
=%	Member	by organisation
=-	Semi-formal title	by common usage
=+	Machine	by domain owner

Examples:

peter@mydomain.com	No title
PeterFox==BSc@mydomain.co.uk	University degree (UK)
Sally=MD@smallco.co.uk	Role assigned by Smallco
=Ast.MD@smallco.co.uk	Just a role
RitaRaymond=!DameOfBritishEmpire@foo.com	Honour
RitaRaymond=%Trustee@someCharity.org.uk	Trustee member
SafetyCommittee=+Distributor@foo.com	Email to all on committee
ReverendTomThumb=-Doctor@ce.uk	Doctor of divinity
Jim==PhD,Ma,BSc=%UnivRowingClub@...	Multiple titles

By looking at these examples we can see some issues:

Are there accepted abbreviations that can used?

This issue is mostly one of convenient communication. Abbreviations can simplify or obfuscate. There are two sorts:
- Shortened everyday words :
    - MD for managing director, Ast. for Assistant/PA/Gofer/Secretary
- Acronyms for specific titles :
    - MD for Doctor, PhD for Doctor, LLD for Doctor.

The first type can be standardised by evolving common usage, the second needs a bit of formal control and interpretation.
- NOTE: The full-stop (period) cannot be used in a mailbox label.

How is the authority to use a title granted and policed?

This depends on the type of the title and the existing policing arrangements. Here we clarify who controls the right to use the title. This is important as false claims to entitlement are likely to lead to deception; so a reasonable design goal is to reduce grey-area wriggle-room.

Domain owners do as they please

For a Role(=) and a Machine(=+) the owner of the domain controls their use.

Use of formal titles and qualifications depends on jurisdiction

Formal qualification(==) and honours(=!) are typically governed by national legal frameworks. These may be opaque and further confused by different standards in different jurisdictions. The only way we can start to make sense of this is to read the title in the context of the jurisdiction from where the domain originates. Thus for example '==Optometrist' might mean different things on a .uk, .de or .au (or .com depending on where it is registered) domain. Although the scheme being proposed does nothing more than the printed equivalents, being able to query a database of controlled titles could be very useful and simple to automate.

Semi-formal titles (=-)

There may be cases where a respected person has not been formally awarded a title but it is used in common practice. It might be that a title from another jurisdiction is being used in a place where that title is controlled via some legal framework. This might apply to general titles such as Doctor.   There is no formal control of these assumed titles except that somebody using "==" when they should be using "=-" is in trouble with 'the authorities'.

Membership (=%)

Status competition in what are supposed to be esteemed organisations is intense. Allowing people and organisations to flaunt this in their address should be catered for. (Literally in the case of 'Reservations=%Michelin5stars@SomePoshNosh.com'!) The controlling authority would be the owner of the IP in the name used, and a mis-user exposes themselves to civil and criminal litigation.

Machine(=+)

I believe it is useful to indicate that an email recipient of the first instance is a machine and the message is kinking-off a process rather than waiting for somebody to read.

This is important when things go wrong and to make things obvious. The example given was an email distributor *SafetyCommittee=+Distributor@foo.com* which makes it clear that the message is going to be broadcast rather than being sent to a secretary. How about *MyOtherComputer=+DupForReference@home.org*

Mechanical processing

Given that we are formally specifying another optional part to a 'mailbox' address it will be possible to parse then act on the additional information. What form could this processing take?

Client receipt

It would be trivial for an email-receiving program to be configured with "=sales" as a mailbox, thus indicating a function rather than a person.

An extension of this which requires more 'intelligence' is to assume that mail to "Mary=orderqueries" is more of a request to query an order than to contact Mary herself. Perhaps Mary is on holiday in which case a fall-through can be instigated or maybe Mary has been promoted. In this case someone who wants to speak specifically to her would use the mailbox "Mary".

Client dispatch

A corporate email sending program would want to control the use of "=" and might be clever enough to automatically append the appropriate role. When I've asked BigCo about something critical I'm not too happy to receive a reply from Fred=DogsBody.

Wide surveillance

Wherever titled emails are used on web pages there are likely to be harvesting bots. This technology can be used to monitor the use/mis-use of titles and also to assist documenting meaning, validity etc.

Conclusion

With email names being an important label which says things about us it is useful to be able to enrich them so that for example "S.R.Jones" becomes "Prof. Sally Jones Head of Dept.". Further the sender might be trying to contact the person or their role. Here *srjones@maths.univ.ac.uk* might be discarded in favour of *SallyJones==Prof=DeptHead@maths.univ.ac.uk*. which might be shortened by senders to *=DeptHead@*... when the role was being addressed and *SallyJones@*... or *SallyJones=Prof@*... when the person herself was being addressed. In short the sender gets two chances to make contact.

As the local part of the email address is easy to adapt this would be easy to implement informally. It is also compatible with existing email systems. But it also provides the hook required to improve the management of incoming mail.

Reliability is improved by identifying the nature of the entitlement to the title using the appropriate symbols to 'hook into' the framework of permissions that already exists.