Outlook mobile & OWA – Observance of shared folder permissions
Improvement request

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Background
In my organisation I have found that workers who need to share access to business emails and who use a combination of Outlook's Windows, OWA and mobile apps can – in one specific and important respect - experience real frustration because of an inconsistency in the behaviour of these apps. Arguably, the root cause of this problem is a design flaw in the OWA and mobile apps which Microsoft ought to fix. I decided it was worth elaborating this matter and arguing for its resolution because, at its core, it seems to be a simple problem that others will have experienced, that works against good business process design and which could be easily solved. I'd be grateful for any feedback or suggestions. And apologies for the length of this post. I'll use my organisation's experience as a real business case study.

Outlook behaviour
Using Outlook client for Windows, if I open an unread message in a shared folder to which I have been granted 'Reviewer' (i.e. read-only) permission, the message is not marked as 'read' for either me or the folder owner. However, if I use Outlook for Android or OWA to open the same message, that message is automatically marked as read – which the folder owner does not want. Also, I am permitted to manually mark it as read/unread whereas I get a permissions error trying to do this under Outlook for Windows.

Why is this a problem?
As an example, our construction company employs a number of project managers and one part-time bookkeeper. Environment is Microsoft 365 Business. The bookkeeper receives and sends all their correspondence via the MS365 user-id & email account *accounts@company.com*. When dealing with clients, suppliers and subcontractors our project managers need on-demand, read-only visibility of *accounts@company.com's* email messages. To achieve this the bookkeeper / folder owner has granted them 'Reviewer' permission to the Inbox and Sent Mail folders of *accounts@company.com*. When everyone was using just Outlook for Windows this arrangement worked very well.

However, our project managers increasingly want the flexibility of also using Outlook mobile and OWA depending whether they are in or out of the office. These apps work very well except for one key issue: the 'Reviewer' permission works differently from the way it does with Outlook for Windows. When the bookkeeper opens a message in the Inbox of *accounts@company.com* then the status of the message visibly changes from 'unread' to 'read'. If a project manager using Outlook Windows client opens that same message before the bookkeeper does then the message status is not changed to 'read' because 'Reviewer' permission prevents any changes – including alteration of 'read/unread' status - from being made to a message. This is the rule established originally by Outlook and Exchange, it is logical and it works ideally: this is what we want.

However, if the same project manager uses Outlook mobile or OWA to open that same message then message status changes from 'unread' to 'read' for all to see – including the bookkeeper Problem!
Why? Because the bookkeeper owns that Inbox and is responsible for seeing that all accounts communications are processed properly. The bookkeeper uses the read/unread status of messages in the conventional way – i.e. to alert them to the arrival of a new 'to do' item and to distinguish

between what they have processed and have still to process. Having one or more other co-workers altering the status of 'their' messages is a real problem. It's the same as the bookkeeper arriving at their work desk in the morning and finding someone has gone through their in-tray and opened some of their mail. The sense of a loss of personal control of the workflow is at the heart of it.

Being able to see at a glance whether there are any unread messages in your Inbox is the most basic of email features. If someone to whom you gave read-only access to your inbox might have marked some or all of your messages as 'read' then that's a problem. Which ones? It's worrying to always have this possibility to deal with.

Can the problem be avoided?
Given the current behaviour of the Outlook mobile and OWA apps we have looked at these alternatives and workarounds-
Recreate accounts@company.com as a mail enabled public folder – this would offer read / unread status on a per-user basis. Public folders are supported on OWA but not on mobile. Also, project managers do not need or want per-user read status. Bookkeeper also loses convenience of having only one folder in their profile to manage, search etc.
Manually 'mark as unread' - appeal to project managers if they open a message in accounts@company.com that is marked as unread when using Outlook mobile or OWA that they manually mark it as 'unread' after reading it. This will not be successful in our organisation.
Categorise – use Outlook's message categories to indicate a separate 'read' or 'unread' status. Again, we consider an unworkable expectation of the average worker.
Recreate accounts@company.com as an Exchange SharedMailbox rather than a UserMailbox – a SharedMailbox behaves the same as an Exchange UserMailbox on OWA and mobile so the problem is not solved.
Create new accounts2@company.com SharedMailbox – and automatically forward duplicates of all messages being received into or sent from accounts@company.com to this mailbox. Give project managers access to the Inbox and Sent Items of this mailbox which is not used by bookkeeper. This will solve the problem but at the cost of duplicating all accounts@company.com emails. Probably the best solution until the core problem with Outlook is fixed.

What is a good resolution for this problem?
Best resolution would be for Outlook mobile and OWA to be modified to properly and fully honour the permissions held by Exchange for accessing a shared folder. This would mean that if anyone opened a unread message in a folder for which they had only 'Reviewer' permission then the read/unread status of that message would not be altered – just as Outlook for Windows has always done. Outlook mobile and OWA should handle read / unread status exactly the same way they currently handle the 'flag' and 'categorise' functions, which both require 'edit' permission to the folder.

A user's email experience across the basic functions of Outlook for Windows, Outlook mobile and OWA should be as simple and consistent as possible, and this is largely the case already. But it's ironic that while the UI for managing permissions for shared folders is identical in both Outlook for Windows and OWA ('permissions panel' function not yet available in mobile) how those permissions affect the setting of the read / unread status of a message is different for each app.

Can the Outlook mobile and OWA teams consider this bug report / improvement request please?

Thank You