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Is eMail a Killer App, or an App to Kill?

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eMail has often been called the “killer app” – the application that essentially “made” the Internet. Indeed, email clearly produces the highest volume of Internet usage; estimates of worldwide email volume now run as high as 31 BILLION individual messages per day (Source: IDC). And indeed, most of us would find it incredibly hard to get our work done without email. Furthermore, email is a powerful social tool that helps us stay in touch with business colleagues, family and friends around the globe (and, sometimes even with family members downstairs in the same house!).

Yet for all its ease of use and low cost, email is clearly a good news/bad news phenomenon. In many respects email creates as many problems as it solves, and it may just be the wrong model for the kind of distributed but collaborative work (and life) that most of us lead today.

Problem number one is that email clogs our electronic inboxes and often dominates far too much of our daily work. Some managers and professionals we know report regularly receiving 100 – 200 messages a day (not counting spam, which is at least problem number two, if not worse). While there is some useful filtering and filing software available, the fact remains that someone has to open each of those messages and then either file it, trash it, or reply to it.

And unless you maintain completely separate email accounts and inboxes for different kinds of messages, your daily routine is typically a *mélange* of urgent work messages, FYI copies, noncritical messages, personal messages, and – of course – all that unwanted spam.

Coping with email means being fluid, shifting gears quickly, and – perhaps most importantly – being willing to ignore some messages altogether or leave them unopened until later in the day (that is perhaps the hardest task of all for those of us who have learned to work at “Internet speed” and worry about being out of touch for even a few minutes).

But the more fundamental challenge is that email really works best as a one-time point-to-point communication medium (both one-to-one and one-to-many), while most of our communications (of all kinds) are actually events within a larger stream: part of an ongoing dialogue with one or more other individuals.



Most email systems retain the original message when you type a reply, so the messages you send and receive usually contain a history of your correspondence (in reverse order, of course). While that feature may be helpful when you have an extended exchange with one other person, think about how messy it gets when the stream of communications is with a larger group.

For example, I was recently engaged in a relatively simple exchange with six other people. We were doing nothing more than scheduling a meeting and agreeing on a location. The total volume of messages we exchanged was absolutely staggering. Each one of us used “Reply to All,” so each time I sent out a reply I was actually blasting out six messages, and each of my respondents would then reply to me and copy everyone else. Thus, I had to open, read, and assimilate six separate responses (each of which contained only a partial history of our prior correspondence, since I replied to only one of the six messages I had received the last time around).

You have no doubt had exactly the same experience. Part of the difficulty is that email is really just an electronic “update” of paper mail. That is, email follows the paradigm of paper mail, which involves sending a physical document from one place to another. The problem is that email, being electronic, is different; when I send you a message I automatically have an identical copy of the message still on my computer. And of course I can send the same message to as many other individuals as I want, at essentially no additional cost. However, no matter how many times I send or resend a message, each copy of it is stored as a separate electronic file, both on my computer and on the computers of every individual who receives it.

The designers of email, while well-intentioned, have created a monster.

Consider a totally different paradigm – I store my message and any related document files in a discussion database; you receive a brief notification that it’s there (or, you simply “check in” to the discussion database on a regular basis). You then access the database, where you can see my latest response along with everyone else’s, listed neatly in chronological order.

This isn’t new, of course; it’s exactly the way Internet News Groups and Forums already work. But think how much simpler it is, and how many fewer new messages you have to open. The fact is that most active groups of people spend an inordinate amount of time (and chew up an inordinate amount of bandwidth) sending one-time messages (with all their histories attached) around and around to each other.

I believe the only way out of this endless vicious circle is to move as much of our work as we can to a collaborative platform that serves as a repository for files, dialogue threads, and other kinds of data. Store your work and messages in an “eroom” where your fellow team members with approved access can get at it whenever they need to – and on their own schedule. It’s a much simpler and more efficient way to work.



There are several existing collaborative platforms that are built on this paradigm of common workspaces. In fact, Lotus Notes was designed this way, and continues to be a widely-used platform for knowledge management and distributed collaboration. More recently, Groove (www.groove.net) has built a web-based peer-to-peer application that enables small workgroups to create common workspaces without even needing a central server or repository (it is worth noting that Ray Ozzie, the inventor of Lotus Notes, is also the founder and chief scientist at Groove).

We have been using Groove for several months in our *Future of Work* research project, and are finding it a powerful tool for achieving truly distributed collaboration. We use Groove-based Instant Messaging for quick informal exchanges, store all our working documents in a common space, a synchronized copy of which resides on each of our PC's, and record key ideas and notes from conversations with sponsors and colleagues in a threaded discussion space. And when we're engaged in a conference call we often use IM's or the Chat facility as a "back channel" that enables some of us to connect outside the group conversation to check ideas, plan the next part of the call, or share ideas privately in real time.

eMail is clearly not going to disappear, and for most of us its benefits far outweigh its costs. However, I can almost guarantee that once you experience the power of a good collaborative platform you'll find yourself wishing everyone you communicate with was using it too.

About the Work Design Collaborative

The Work Design Collaborative is an applied research and development consortium. The Collaborative is widely recognized as the leading source of knowledge and expertise related to the future of work. The Collaborative produces and distributes management tools, surveys, benchmark databases, white papers and technical reports, conferences and workshops, newsletters, books and articles, and public presentations on the changing nature of work. Our consortium is composed of senior business, IT, HR, and facilities executives, as well as smaller technology companies and service providers selling into these markets.

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