Love that e-mail

Last month, the Love Bug virus spread around the world. Even security experts were taken by surprise with the speed of this computer virus. It seems this was the most severe eruption from the Philippines since 1991, when Mount Pinatubo exploded, hastening the departure of the U.S. military from Subic Bay and Clark Field.

In less than one day the virus spread from Asia to Europe to North America. It attacked through a popular e-mail program and automatically forwarded itself to every e-mail recipient listed in the affected address book. Many companies had no choice but to shut down their e-mail servers. Subsequent viruses have been more virulent.

When I started my transportation career, telex and teletype were still the established ways of communicating with distant locations. At that time, fax transmissions were slow, unreliable and expensive. Railroads could still use company mail, but the steamship industry depended on telex messages.

An entire department existed to manage the sending, receiving, processing and copying of telex messages. Literally, entire books were assembled, copied and passed out each day. Mountains of paper would accumulate from messages read and discarded (often during meetings). A good manager was a person who read all his messages. True privacy was non-existent. “Confidential” meant that only half the office would read personal messages.

Enter e-mail, first by mainframe, which was cumbersome and slow. With office automation came PC-available systems in the mid-1990s. Then, surprisingly, the telex seemed to return when nobody was watching.

Although e-mail messages can be sent to select individuals, it is so easy to copy multiple individuals on e-mail that recipient proliferation mounted. Firms that formerly addressed telexes to departments (rather than individuals) now, with e-mail, copy anyone even remotely involved.

Several recent studies have calculated office workers send or receive on average several hundred messages a day. While distracting and distractive in the office, this practice is overwhelming for travelers. As remote e-mail access becomes easier, the number of messages increases. While the laptop with modem and access through the Internet via public systems has now been supplanted by wireless technology, e-mail still requires time and energy.

The office automation irony extends beyond telex replacement. More and more e-mail messages are getting printed and handled just like telex messages. Recent research has calculated that today's average office worker uses over 15,000 pieces of paper a year.

There is maybe no greater sign of e-mail's emergence into the business mainstream than the concern of lawyers.

Oliver North can be excused for being unaware of the possible resurrection of incriminating e-mail messages when Iran-Contra was being investigated in the mid 1980s. But certainly Bill Gates should have known better. The independent counsel's office is seeking e-mails pursuant to a subpoena that the White House maintains it can’t produce due to a computer glitch two years ago.

In fact e-mail has become a national security issue. The National Security Agency was a leader during the Cold War in code breaking and electronic surveillance, and many of its innovations had practical applications for the American computer revolution. But today's NSA can no longer manage the high-tech monster it created, and seems almost unprepared to review effectively the high-volume of daily e-mail and fiber optic transmissions.

Meanwhile, new technologies have been developed to ensure privacy online. Some companies offer encryption directly to a third-party network that enables only the sender and receiver to read the message. Other solutions involve “auto-shredder” features that delete messages after a specified period of time — and prevent them from being printed, copied or forwarded.

E-mail has made it easier to communicate globally. But what has e-mail done to the art of communication? Many feel it has caused real alienation, obviously removing any need for personal contact. Who has not received an e-mail from someone literally several feet away? (Otherwise shy employees will commonly feel free to send e-mail company-wide — often on trivial matters. This can start an e-mail avalanche when people respond to all instead of just responding to the original sender.)

This is yet another example of technology being no substitute for management. An unhealthy corporate culture will only get worse and escalate faster with e-mail.

Meanwhile, e-mail has eliminated the “down time” some individuals need to temper their reactions and thoughtfully weigh complicated issues. Many e-mails, too tempting not to send, are regretted soon after.

E-mail is an integral part of office life. The National Labor Relations Board recently ruled that e-mail “is more like a telephone call than mail.” Perhaps this is just one more case of the lines blurring between working and not working. Like any great productivity tool, though, it needs to be managed or it will manage you.

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