



Dysfunctional Email

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I couldn't function without it, but email is becoming dysfunctional and showing its age. Remember the charming 1998 film *You've Got Mail*? Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks exchanged romantic notes, and a cute little postbox icon changed when each message arrived. In 1998, I had two email accounts, one business (using Microsoft Outlook) and one personal, available only via dial-up service. As time passed, the quantity of my email accounts grew, as did the type of email servers and email providers. Still, even a few years ago I considered it a character defect if I ever had more than 30 emails in my inbox. Times have changed, and not for the better.

Here is how complicated email has become for me, and I suspect for many of you. I have two personal email accounts and a forwarding ieee.org account (so I can point to my email provider du jour). That account usually, but not always, works. I view my personal email via the web and Microsoft Outlook, on several PCs and on an iPad. I have two work accounts, both accessible via browser and Outlook clients. Each account and email device displays email and folders differently (or not at all). Some senders insist they can send me email only if they spell my address in lowercase; others insist they never received mail I've sent. Volume also makes finding specific messages difficult.

And we all know technology can fail. For instance, on Jan. 1, MSNBC reported that Hotmail users were complaining of missing email. Most email problems seem to be a combination of bugs, cognitive overload, usability issues, and aggressive spam filtering. I understand the value of spam filtering, but its unpredictability and aggressiveness remind me of airport security: How much is too much? As to volume, my personal and work email volume each total more than 100 messages per day.

At last year's EMC-sponsored Writer's Summit, Melissa Webster of IDC said that reading and answering work email takes an average of 13 hours each week. Each week, according to Webster, workers search 3.7 hours on average but don't find what they're looking for. So, they ask someone to resend it or re-create the original (another 2.5 hours per week). This only exacerbates the problem. A recent AIIM survey provides additional warning. Almost 50% of organizations use email for their "important" documents, yet about one in seven IT organizations-themselves overwhelmed by email volume-has a policy of deleting email after 3 months.

So companies are saving important files in email, which are then lost. Before we can find them, they are deleted unexpectedly. If productivity losses weren't enough, consider the potential business risk.

At the same Writer's Summit, attorney Ralph Losey described e-discovery scenarios where attorneys sometimes ask just to review the email-that's where the incriminating evidence often lurks. The estimated review cost for one defendant was \$300,000, and the client was tempted just to admit guilt. That was cheaper than the discovery cost. As Losey said, "You can't have justice without truth, and there is no truth if you cannot find the relevant evidence."

What's the solution? On the business side, email management tools, part of every full-service ECM vendor's product portfolio, can be part of the solution. These tools can reduce duplicates; provide full-text searching of content, attributes, and attachments; assure compliance with retention policies; and facilitate litigation readiness. If you have one, use your content management system, not email, to share or refer to content. If you can, send links to documents, not the documents themselves. This ensures email recipients will always have the most current version. However, tools alone cannot do the whole job. Ultimately a combination of engaged email users, governance, and tools are needed for a complete email management solution.

On the personal side, use email sparingly. Friends say that email I send from my iPad is shorter, and they like that. With its awkward virtual keyboard, I've noticed my iPad email does get to the point faster. Cull trivial email via the web before downloading it. Periodically identify spam, review spam folders, and update email white lists. Still, all these together don't solve the problem.

The boundaries between email and social media such as microblogging are blurring. Still, dealing with 10 times as many tweets as email messages is no solution either. Information overload, the difficulties of preserving records, and responding to e-discovery demands will only worsen. Email dysfunction and overload are not sustainable, and-as Herbert Stein is reported to have said-anything that can't continue, won't.