

The e-mail explosion

Before e-mail, too many documents were already being sent to too many people. E-mail has amplified this problem.



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If there is one medium of communication that is exploding in use in today's office environment, it is electronic mail. According to statistics published by Ferris Research, the average worker spends about 49 minutes per day managing their e-mail documents. According to the same study, the average worker receives about 22 e-mail messages per day.

The Gartner Group estimates that the volume of e-mail messages will grow at a remarkable compound annual rate of 40 per cent until 2005. Today, e-mail represents as much as 60 per cent of business correspondence, by some estimates. Many, probably most, important business decisions are now documented using e-mail alone.

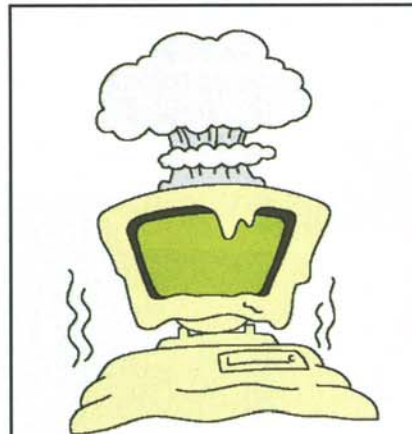
Best of two worlds

There is a reason for e-mail's stunning success. In the past, we had a choice. We could communicate quickly, by telephone, or we could communicate in writing, by mail. If we needed to do both, we would phone first, and then confirm our conversation in writing. E-mail allows us to "have our cake and eat it, too." It allows us to communicate in writing with ease, and it allows us to send that written communication instantly.

The difficulty is that while the capacity of tools to create e-mail messages has grown exponentially, tools to manage them for the long term have not kept pace. The need to manage documents systematically throughout their

life cycle still exists, but this need is seldom met in practice.

With or without e-mail, too many documents have always been created and distributed to too many people. The speed with which e-mail systems can be used to create and distribute records



New medium, old message

Once, when I was helping a client classify a series of documents, I came upon one item whose distribution list ran on for page after page. As I waded through the distribution list, searching for content, I wondered what on earth could merit such a wide and complex distribution. When I finally came to the front page of the document, I found its title, "Paperwork Simplification Study." The medium may have changed, but the message remains the same. DR

only amplifies this problem. The average e-mail is sent to at least three recipients, and it is not at all unusual for an e-mail to be sent to every user on a system, whether they need it or not.

There are various software tools available to help manage e-mail more effectively. Some focus purely on e-mail

Executive viewpoint

Unless policies and procedures are put in place to regulate how people send e-mail to each other, distribute it through organizations and store it, the sheer mass of data will overload information technology systems and bring them to a halt.

documents themselves. Others are geared toward incorporating e-mail messages into imaging or electronic document management systems (EDM) systems. Others are records management applications that have been extended to include e-mail records. Each type of tool has its place. The key is to define and specify your requirements before choosing a particular product.

Of course, buying a tool is not the same thing as solving a problem. Buying a violin does not make you a concert virtuoso. Buying a software tool is not the same thing as taking control of your e-mail communication. Either goal requires patience, dedication and discipline, not just a tool.

E-mail policies needed

The difficult issues are not related to the hardware and software tools used to create records. They relate to the organization's culture and expectations. Companies need an e-mail policy that conveys the message that e-mail messages are corporate records. As such, they belong to the organization. They must be managed throughout their life cycle in the same way that organizations manage other valuable, or costly, resources.

Given the growth experts expect in terms of e-mail proliferation, the time to get these policies and procedures in place is now. Organizations that fail to address this issue will find their administrative and technical systems grinding to a halt.

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