

The Future of Email

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Will email continue to "boldly grow towards a brighter future" or will we hear the cry "I'm not sure we can take any more, Captain!"

For a number of years experts have been painting a gloomy future for emails as organisations and individuals continue to be attacked and bombarded. In many cases they are almost overwhelmed by the sheer volume and proliferation of useless spam and its derivatives. Will the "engines give out" or is there a solution waiting in the wings?

Back in 2003 spam accounted for an estimated 40% of emails and it was suggested that if measures were not put in place that this exponential threat would cause a decline in email popularity and we could see an exodus of users to other forms of e-communication, with Instant Messaging (IM) being the prime candidate. Although, IM's Spam equivalent, "Spim", is also on the increase.

Even a year ago an article in Business Wire about the "Future of email Growth", quoted that the IDC were estimating the size of email volumes sent worldwide in 2006 would exceed 3.5 Exabyte (1 billion gigabytes!!). Since, the volume of spam accounts for a significant chunk of this, it inevitably equates to a huge amount of resource usage and associated cost. Investment in security products alone exceeded an estimated \$9 billion in 2005, to counter these threats.

It has been recently estimated by Postini, a global leader in Integrated Message Management, that spam accounts for as much as 90% of email traffic!! In the last 3 months of 2006 alone, spam levels increased by a hefty 72%. It's not just all about the sheer volume of spam, but the sheer level of sophistication in the approach which spammers are increasingly using. Spammers are churning out more and more variants, such as Web Beacons - or images adapted to secretly send messages back to the sender which can also contain harmful code.

There is also the proliferation of "Botnets" where spam mail is routed through home PC's that have been hijacked by viruses or which have accessed booby-trapped web pages.

There have been many suggestions, applications and methods used in combating spam with varying levels of success but it has always been and will continue to be, a classic "arms race". Organisations have tried and continue to apply many methods including: "blacklists" for known spam culprits and "whitelists" for the good guys! However, these require regular maintenance and can not be expected to provide a definitive result. On the back of such lists some organisations, have tried to create trusted or "closed" email groups but unfortunately this can't provide a definitive answer either as email relies emphatically on the 'openness' of its communication, you can't afford to cut out a percentage of your potentially future customers! There are also a myriad of security products available, however, be aware of "Ya, don't get owt for nowt" and be wary of the free security products out there as many can be fake!

Currently, it would appear that the economics of spam also favour the bad guy as it costs virtually nothing to make a virus and spam run. Some, however, have suggested that economics could in fact come to the rescue, if part of the communication process incurred a charge whether as part of an opt-in procedure for 'whitelists' or as part of the email fulfilment process. This then, in principal, would target the spammers who in one way or another would end up owing considerable sums of money for abuse of the systems. However, in reality the sheer elusive skill and nature of these spammers could mean that enforcing payment may well be just as difficult as stopping the spam in the first place.

Managed email services certainly have a place in facilitating a response to this arms race as particularly for smaller organisations they can provide powerful tools and services required to combat spam and its derivatives provided at a cost which is more realistic to the organisation.



It shouldn't be forgotten that email has evolved over time into a communications method with a multitude of uses. It's not just a form of brief communication, but is also used for prompts, time management, file transfer, project management, to name a few! All of which adds to the volumes of emails and it's continued popularity.

So, what does the future hold for email? What needs to be considered here is that email is only one form of e-communication; it's only part of the picture. E-communication tends to fall into two main types: asynchronous messaging - email, SMS, RSS, Voicemail & FAX which do not rely on the individual being present. Whilst, synchronous messaging applications are different because

they involve immediate interaction, for example Instant Messaging (IM), telephony and web-conferencing. People are using more and more ways to e-communicate.

Different users demographics mean they use and perceive e-communications in different ways. There is already a teen culture who view emails as something to use to talk to "old people", organisations or to send complex information. It is the synchronous or real-time communication or conversation which interests them. Already, users are becoming creatures of their communication devices and are moulding their communication patterns to mixed media.

This mirrors Bill Gates' views in his article, "The Unified Communications Revolution". Where he outlines his belief that communication is still a significant challenge, in that, individuals in a single day use many forms of communication across many platforms and through different devices. Although, we naively believe that the proliferation of devices and their communication devices should make this easier, in fact, the irony is that many of these devices and platforms are "disconnected" and so it's actually in some ways more difficult and time consuming to make contact. How many times have you tried to contact someone on the phone and ended up leaving a voicemail, followed by an email and/or a text message? Microsoft's goal is to put the individual at the centre of the communications experience by integrating the platforms, software and devices into a single environment using a unique user identity that can span phones, PC's and other devices. Their vision is to make it easy for people to reach each other using the most productive device and method available to them, giving control over when, how and by whom they can be reached.

Inevitably this will be driven by the younger generation who in many cases are already indoctrinated and use many of the processes already, albeit across these "disconnected" environments.

So, will email "as we know it" survive? I suspect so, but the control of it's misuse will I feel be truly critical in 2007. This combined with the proliferation of devices and communication methods and the inexorable move towards Bill Gates' "Unified Communications" dream will continue to keep us all on our toes. We may, however, need an upgrade to our engines on the way!