



Reclaiming Control Of Your Business Communication

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The way we communicate in business is changing. Over the last 20 years, email has become more and more firmly established as the primary business communication tool. It has served us well, but the limitations of email are becoming more and more apparent. "Email overload" has become something of a cliché, but is an over-simplification of the problem, and it would be wrong to consider eradication of email as the goal. There are three major factors that contribute to inefficiency in business communication:

- Communication Overload
- Lack of Accountability
- Communication Fragmentation

This paper considers these three obstacles to efficient business communication, and identifies strategies to address them.

Communication Overload

There is no doubt that most of us receive far too many emails, but blaming email itself for this is really a case of "shooting the messenger". Instead, we should take more responsibility for our own communication behavior, and our misuse of email for things it is notoriously poor at. The ubiquity, simplicity and openness of email mean that it is unlikely to disappear from our working lives any time soon, as it is a very efficient conduit of person-to-person messages and machine-to-person notifications.

But email is very poor as a platform for group discussion and collaboration. This, combined with the "reply all" habit many people have developed has led to the explosion in email traffic, where we are often subjected to long group discussions that we have very little interest in.

Volume of email messages is not the only factor contributing to communication overload. In an effort to address email's shortcomings, a huge range of new communication tools has emerged. Most people now receive messages through email, SMS, instant messengers such as Skype, Lync and WhatsApp, and social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and Pinterest. Combine this with what feels like every smartphone app wanting to send you push notifications, and we have "messaging overload" rather than "email overload". And these messages are distributed across far too many different services - it is time to acknowledge that email is only part of the problem and that to address our information overload problems we need to reverse the trend of messaging fragmentation.

The Promise of Enterprise Social Networking

The success of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter has inevitably caused many companies to consider how similar techniques and technologies can be applied to internal business communication.

The benefits of social networks inside an organization were documented extensively in a July 2012 report from McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) entitled *The social economy: Unlocking value and productivity through social technologies*. MGI found that social technology can improve the productivity of knowledge workers by 20-25% by reducing the time spent reading and answering email, searching and gathering information, and communicating internally.



Yet many organizations are yet to deploy any serious social project within the company, leaving the promise of enterprise social networking largely unfulfilled. There are many reasons for this such as lack of organizational-readiness, reluctance to change and a perception that greater sharing of knowledge is not a sufficiently high priority. But a common fear amongst many potential ESN users is that any social business network becomes yet another communication channel to maintain, thereby exacerbating the information overload and fragmentation rather than solving it.

Lack of Accountability

Despite the clichés about email overload, for many people the biggest communication irritation is not the number of messages they receive – it’s the messages they don’t receive. It can be intensely frustrating and inefficient to ask someone a question via email and never get a response, or receive it a week later when you’ve already had to compensate for the fact you’re not going to get an answer.

Again, the root of the problem is not email itself – it is a lack of good communication habits from the recipient. If the sender has shown you the courtesy of not interrupting you on a highly disruptive channel like phone or instant message, then the least you can do is return that courtesy, even if it is to say “I can’t reply until next week”. But email does little to help people break those bad habits. Unanswered emails become easier to forget as new messages force them further down the inbox. Conventions such as read replies and due dates on email messages, which could potentially mitigate these problems, have never been consistently applied by all clients and servers, so remain unreliable except in closed circles of users.

All of this leads to a lack of accountability in email. When you receive a message, there is little in an email client that compels or encourages you to reply in a timely fashion, or even read it. But this is not unique to email – a similar lack of accountability exists in instant messaging, and social networks often have even less accountability, allowing users to filter out content they don’t want to see.

Little surprise then that the last year or two has seen the emergence of a number of task management systems designed to inject some accountability into business communication. These range from simple to-do list apps to full-blown project management systems. Features vary, but it is common for each task to have an explicit due date, a list of assignees and a record of the completion status for each assignee. Some also have explicit acceptance steps to ensure that the assignee immediately acknowledges what they have been asked to do, rather than waiting until they have completed the task before the sender receives any sort of reply.

Such systems offer vastly improved accountability and much greater efficiency in getting work done, because there is a clearer picture of who is expected to do what and by when. However, like many other new communication tools, they contribute to another problem – fragmentation of corporate knowledge.

Communication Fragmentation

One of the side-effects of the proliferation of new communication services is that IT departments are struggling to control which services are used, and where corporate data is stored.

The concept of “bring your own device” (BYOD) is now well understood and established in most organizations



– employees using their own phones, tablets and other computing devices for business purposes. IT departments have now become increasingly well equipped to handle this trend, reap the benefits it offers and mitigate the risks. But the emergence of “bring your own application” (BYOA) is much less well understood, and typically harder for IT departments to manage.

The BYOA trend has emerged due to web services offering business applications with consumer levels of simplicity and usability, often with a freemium model that enables employees to start using them without any company expenditure. It’s hardly surprising that knowledge workers have embraced sleek, free productivity tools in preference to creaking old enterprise systems.

“Bring Your Own App” and Shadow IT

The introduction of unapproved software into the company is sometimes described as Shadow IT, and it has consequences that are not immediately apparent to the user. Most of these services store data on the provider’s servers, which has implications for the company’s data security, discoverability and accountability.

BYOA can also lead to the fragmentation of the company’s collective knowledge across a wide range of disparate services. It may initially seem very appealing to a group of employees to start using a new tool to improve communications in their team. But suppose another department picks a different, competing tool. And employees in another region pick yet another tool, perhaps one in a different language. The result is that discussions are scattered across a range of incompatible services. What starts as a well-intentioned quest for better productivity can quickly become a corporate data security nightmare.

It is important to remember that there are two sides to corporate data security:

1. Preventing unauthorized users accessing data they should not.
2. Enabling authorized users to retrieve data they are entitled to.

The current climate of concern about surveillance and online crime means that most of the attention on data security concerns the first of these – the keep-the-hackers-out side of security. But you should not neglect the second. Suppose a group of three employees hold a discussion on an instant message tool like Skype and then, over time, all three leave the company. The company now has no way of retrieving the content of that discussion because it was conducted on a service where those employees were considered individuals, not members of the company. In this case, not only has corporate knowledge been fragmented, it has been lost.

Business communication tools need to reflect the way corporate data ownership differs from consumer data ownership, and provide management capabilities in order to protect company intellectual property.

The Best of Breed Myth

The problem of fragmentation wouldn’t be so bad if these new services were complete solutions, but they typically are not. They are usually specialist solutions with a relatively limited feature set, as they are usually designed to complement existing services rather than replace them. To put together a full collaboration suite often means using separate services for messaging, file sharing, task management, social networking, voice calls and video conferencing.



This “pick and mix” method of selecting services is often referred to as a “best of breed” approach. The attraction of such an approach is clear – choose the best of everything. But it is somewhat superficial and unrealistic, because it overlooks the inherent incompatibilities that such a wide range of services suffer from. It is all very well emailing a group of people using system A to assign them a task in system B to review a document shared in system C, but the differences in access control models and information architectures of A, B and C inevitably lead to “I can’t see the document” and “I can’t log in to B” types of problems. And how do you reply? By email in A? As a comment in B or C? And given that it could be any of these, how do you search for a comment that you previously read and need to find again?

So although they are perhaps less fashionable, integrated suites give a more consistent user experience, and offer greater protection of a company’s collective knowledge. Access control models are consistent across messages, files and tasks and search can find content of any type. Equally importantly, it makes it easier for IT to assess the risk of trusting corporate knowledge to such systems.

Reclaiming Control

To address the threats of communication overload, fragmentation, and lack of accountability consider the following 5-point plan to reclaim control of your business communication

1. Balance your information flows – efficient communication depends on the correct balance of “push” information flows (where the sender chooses what the recipient receives, e.g. email) and “pull” (where the recipient chooses what they say, e.g. social network activity stream). Too much “push” leads to information overload; too much “pull” can lead to a lack of accountability.
2. Consolidate, don’t fragment – instead of adding more and more communications services which fragment both your attention and company knowledge, aim to reduce the total number of different tools in use by selected integrated communication suites.
3. Add accountability to your communications – where appropriate, use tasks to be more precise about who is expected to do what, by when, and remove the inherent ambiguity of email
4. Secure your company’s knowledge – work with vendors who understand the importance of corporate data privacy, security and accessibility. Don’t entrust your organization’s assets to consumer-grade tools that weren’t designed to handle the complexities of business communication.
5. Take responsibility for your own communication habits – using the right tools can make business communication more efficient, but only if the users of those tools are prepared to update their working practices leave some of their engrained bad habits behind.

