INTRODUCTION

During the past decade, strategic information technology (IT) applications, such as electronic mail (e-mail), have been used to gain competitive advantage over rivals or prevent rivals from gaining a competitive advantage. The use of e-mail has been considered a component of overall business strategy, and its application depends more on understanding unique business opportunities than on competitive benefits from technological features that are easily duplicated. Since the first message was sent in 1971 by Ray Tomlinson, e-mail has emerged as an important technological requirement in business. E-mail is as common as the U.S. postal mail in the twentieth century. Businesses, schools, and universities are insisting that employees and students have an e-mail account to check updates or download information concerning business tasks or class activities. Given the widespread acceptance and use of this technology, the strategic value of e-mail within an organization should be apparent.

Companies have discovered that they must aggressively pursue new information technologies to exploit their own core competencies. Contemporary organizations have found ways to not only build more functionality onto their core mail systems, but also combine their core capabilities with strategic and creative ways of using e-mail. Clearly the definition and parameters around e-mail are changing, and the use of electronic communication is revolutionizing how firms do business.

BACKGROUND

E-mail, as a specific information technology, not only has proven to be one of the primary technologies by which an organization can begin to achieve radical and beneficial organizational change, but also has become an integral part of the corporate culture in many organizations (Carroll, 1993). This technology, which is considered the electronic transmission of messages, documents, data, and images, has enabled people to send electronic correspondence to others with e-mail addresses anywhere in the world, and is fast, inexpensive, and easy to use, making it a convenient and flexible way to improve corporate communications. As a competitive information technology, e-mail offers many advantages to the dynamic environment of today’s businesses (Reark, 1998).

Literature suggested that e-mail may be used to improve relationships with customers, to link organizations with their strategic business partners, and to enhance communication between managers responsible for business redesign (Kirschner, 1995). This technology may be used to facilitate better coordination of a firm’s communication between departments and divisions—*intraorganizational* uses of e-mail. Although internal communication was considered to be the core use of e-mail, firms are increasingly using it for outside communications—*interorganizational* uses of e-mail which include improving relationships with customers. Lastly, researchers have suggested that the primary benefit of e-mail has been its efficiency (Palme, 1995). For example, e-mail decreased the use of paper, eliminated time delays, and allowed the sender to transmit messages to a list of specific individuals; we refer to these as the organizational benefits of e-mail.

In 2000, more than seven trillion e-mail messages traveled the wires in the U.S. alone, up from a mere four trillion in 1999, and thus supporting the argument that e-mail correspondence is the fastest growing communication medium in the world. The most recent findings report that the average businessperson sends and receives approximately 90 e-mail messages daily (Casperson, 2002). As international competitiveness concerns have forced businesses to right-size, e-mail has surfaced as one of the facilitators that permit savings in middle-management expenditures. The increasing ubiquity of e-mail lessens telephone tag and makes direct communication more efficient, even when there are no other sophisticated systems supports (King & Teo, 1994).

Furthermore, the utilization of e-mail to communicate with customers and suppliers indicates the need for interorganizational linkages. Customers prefer to communicate with key people in a firm through the use of e-mail,
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