In the 1960’s, Marshall McLuhan described a “village of instant communication.” Though it has been a long time coming, the sophisticated computer-based communication systems of the 1990’s have made that vision a reality. Many business organizations and individuals have recently chosen to adopt some form of electronic messaging, usually either electronic mail or voice mail, to support communications within their work environments and with outside organizations. Educational institutions have employed electronic mail for several years for communication among faculty, staff, and students.

Mississippi State University (MSU) recently joined the ranks of organizations who rely on electronic messaging for both intra- and inter-organizational communications. Two electronic mail systems were originally implemented at MSU during the 1987 Fall semester. One, BITNET, is a well-known international network of (primarily) colleges and universities. The other, LAN-E-MAIL (called simply E-MAIL here at MSU), is an in-house system that was written to run on the university’s Novell Local Area Network, linking all university members who have access to the network through an easy-to-use “store and forward” electronic mail system. This paper reports on the rapid growth and success of electronic mail in this particular academic community. While it must be admitted up front that much of the use of the system is for “chit chat” and something akin to a dating service for shy computer users, the system has proved to be a valuable tool for the administration of classes and also as a teaching mechanism to demonstrate various programming or systems design concepts.

Mississippi State University (MSU) has just finished its second full year using an in-house developed mainframe electronic mail system. The primary use of the system has been for student-to-student communications and for class administration. A small number of instructors use the system as an integral part of class administration, sending class-wide messages of announcements, clarifications, and reminders, as well as for electronic posting of class grades. Because many students actually become interested in the system and how it works, it can also serve as a basis for in-class discussion, particularly in programming classes. MSU’s system has been enthusiastically accepted by its user community. There are currently over 1,000 active users, some of whom average at least 10 E-Mail sessions a day. While much of the system’s use is for non-official, unimportant business, its use as a teaching and administrative tool have made it invaluable.

ELECTRONIC MAIL IN THE UNIVERSITY

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Electronic Mail -- A Definition

Any communication system involves the transmission of a message from a sender to a receiver. Voice communication utilizes a spoken, vocal transmission; the U.S. Postal Service provides the transmission of written messages. Electronic mail consists of the transmission of a message via the transmission of an electrical signal -- that is, the message is sent electronically. In the typical electronic mail system, the sender types his or her message using a computer keyboard; the message is then sent through a computer system and stored in memory for delivery to the intended receiver. In general, an electronic message never exists in paper form.

Characteristics of E-Mail

Electronic mail systems can provide either one-way or two-way dialoguing facilities. Most systems offer as their primary feature one-way dialoguing in which a sender can send a message which will be stored until the receiver is ready to accept the message. In cases in which two-way dialogue is not necessary, these systems free the sender from any constraints which might be caused by the message receiver’s possibly varied time schedule. In a university environment, a student working on a program at 2:00 am can send a message to his or her instructor. The instructor can receive and answer the message during more civil hours... One of the chief advantages of electronic mail is the time flexibility it offers its users. An electronic mail system provides a 24-hour-a-day postal service -- a user can send a message at any time of day or night, and the message will be delivered (put into the receiver’s mailbox file) immediately. Additionally, a user can check his or her mail at any time of day or night.

Electronic communication also offers an attractive hurdle over a common academic communications barrier: the reluctance of many students to communicate with a professor in person (Golen & Keller, 1988). With electronic mail, the conversation seems almost anonymous. Many users are much less reluctant to initiate a conversation over computer lines than they would be to initiate a face-to-face discussion.

Many electronic mail systems provide two-way dialoguing facilities in addition to the traditional one-way delivery. BITNET’s “relay” mode is an example of such a system, in which the messages are sent in real-time mode. In some systems, this type of “chat mode” can link two or more users together to provide teleconferencing capabilities. [Note: Yes, chat mode frequently resembles 976-GABB.] Despite these attractive capabilities, though, the primary function of most electronic mail systems is the provision of one-way communications facilities.

There are several commercially available electronic mail systems: MCIMail (MCI Telecommunications), Telemail (U.S. Sprint Communications), and The Source (The Source Telecomputing), to name just a few. In most cases, these electronic messages never exist in paper form. For some communications needs, this risk of no hard copy might cause sufficient concern to negate the benefits of the system. In general, inter-organizational communications appear to be less likely to be transmitted electronically because of this risk factor. Because most business electronic mail is inter-office and intracompany, it remains common for a large organization to develop its own in-house electronic mail system, possibly supplementing that system with a commercial system for interorganizational communications (Fitzgerald, 1988).

The Need for and Growth of Electronic Mail

The spread of computing throughout the world of business has come about primarily because today’s business managers realize that the productivity enhancements that computing technology offers can be the key to making an organization competitive and successful. Office automation tools -- including word processing, document production, and electronic mail -- have gained widespread acceptance, limited in large part only by a particular individual’s ability to type. Indeed,
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