

For an efficient use of electronic mail

(tools, methods)

Jean-Paul Bardez
Telephone: +33 (0)4 42 36 65 11
Fax: +33 (0)4 42 36 56 53
Email: jean-paul.bardez@gemplus.com

Technical communication manager

Gemplus Software Mobile Division
111, route de la Valentine
13011 Marseilles
France

Home:
654, chemin des Manaux
13160 Roquevaire
France
Email: bardez@club-internet.fr

1991: University diploma in translation, ESIT.

1991-1998: Freelance translator and technical writer.

1992: Founding chairman of the Conseil des Rédacteurs Techniques (CRT).

1994-1999: Teacher of technical writing at Paris 8 University, occasional teaching at Rennes 2 University, at CPSS Trudaine and correction of French students' homework at the American University in Paris.

1998: Public Relations Secretary for INTECOM (international federation of technical communicators).

1999: In charge of technical documentation for the mobile telephone software division of Gemplus, world leader in smartcard solutions.

Electronic mail has invaded the French business environment, and no company can afford to do without it. Its use has become so frequent that the excess workload involved often renders it less effective than it could be. Unsolicited messages fill up inboxes and their processing becomes increasingly time-consuming, sometimes causing, instead of relieving, communication problems. Email is no substitute for real dialogue, and some thought is required on how it is being used.

Like any other tool, the effectiveness of electronic mail depends on how it is used. Within a company, it can be used to obtain confirmation of discussions or decisions, to ask questions or raise issues. Just click on the mouse button and you can send information to dozens of people. Unfortunately, it is more difficult to ensure that the information is delivered immediately, which depends on the capacity and workload of the network. This technical constraint aside, I would like to take a look at the aspects of this technology that sometimes run counter to corporate goals of enhancing effectiveness, especially for those companies who use it systematically, without thinking about the specific nature of electronic messages.

When speed does not enhance efficiency

The speed at which a message may be written and sent sometimes makes us forget the risks inherent in outdated interfaces and in the weight of the written word. The character fonts currently in use make it more difficult to read an electronic message on the screen than a similar message composed on a word processor. You should therefore print your messages and re-read them on paper before sending them. In conversation, there is a continuous adjustment process in response to the other person's reaction. A written message is static. It does not take into account the context of the exchange and is devoid of the nuances (ironic tone, smiles, etc.) that abound in conversation. A mailing that is written too fast and sent without the necessary distance can give rise to misunderstandings that require hours of discussion to resolve. Or a simple spelling "miss steak" can ruin the credibility of the author of a message, especially if the writer is in a position of authority. Electronic messages can be re-routed effortlessly to an almost infinite number of recipients other than the person the message was intended for. Quite a powerful weapon, I'm sure you'll agree!

The validation process

The email function that allows you to enclose a document with a message has revolutionised file sending, but is it efficient? One thing that is certain, and quantifiable, is that this increases the time taken to process messages. Whatever the size of the enclosed file, it is more economical time-wise for the author to photocopy a document to be validated and provide paper copies than to ask x number of recipients to open a file (which may require saving it beforehand), then print it out and collect the printout from the printer at the end of the corridor. When you ask someone to do something for you, isn't it preferable to make it as easy as possible for them? This solution also encourages senders to think before sending out successive versions of documents ad infinitum.

You have 2 million new messages waiting

The ease with which it is possible to send circulars or mailshots should not obscure the fact that the working day of the recipients is not endless. Using email to put off tasks or discussions can have a negative effect. The writers of verbose messages run the risk of their messages eventually being ignored. It is just not productive for employees to spend time sorting through masses of incoming messages to find a small number of messages that are relevant or useful. The number of messages in an inbox is inversely proportional to the processing rate of those messages. When a certain volume of messages is exceeded, it is more efficient to revert to direct communication or, when this is geographically impossible, the telephone.

Make your messages easy to read

Messages must be structured and contain a clear statement of what is required of the recipient. There are far too many messages that ramble on for pages, pages that the reader has to decipher to find out what the message is actually about. As for enclosures, the time you take over sending your mail is time saved for the recipients. Remember an email is a written text and not a telephone call or conversation with the person. To make the best use of email, you must take the time to write clear and concise messages and keep the reader in mind.

Personal conclusions

Here are a few simple rules I apply to my own personal use of email

- 1) Keep messages short, well-structured, easy to read, with a clear statement of the response expected from the recipients.
- 2) Write a separate message for each idea.
- 3) Re-read important messages on paper.
- 4) Never respond immediately to a message containing criticism.
- 5) To ask questions, talk to colleagues rather than using the telephone or the email.
- 6) Use the photocopier to distribute texts to be validated.
- 7) Restrict the number of copies of a message to people a response is required from and people to be kept informed.
- 8) Use the "copy to" function to indicate that no action is expected of the recipient.
- 9) Take the time to compose a meaningful message title (subject) which implies the degree of urgency of the message.
- 10) Sort incoming and outgoing messages in separate archives so that they can be easily searched; keep disk space free by filing them regularly.

We will have an opportunity to discuss your personal experiences and exchange ideas during the idea market.

