Opinion Article

E-mail: beneficial or harmful ?

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Introduction

What you are about to read in the following text, is neither how to work with an e-mail software, nor also how to send messages to all your friends. That, most probably, you have done some while ago.

My idea for this article is to provoke pondering and deep thought about the way in which technology improves the way of life of e-mail users. Is this change always for the better? I do not think so. Only if you are away from everything and everyone, which probably is not your case. Relax and read these few words, written by someone who invested some time pondering about these new issues. I do not have answers, on the contrary, in most of the times, I do question.

Users in Portugal

Before I start focusing on the most interesting issues related with this theme, I will do a statistical approach about e-mail using by the Portuguese population. I have used as sources the following studies:

- The Portuguese and the e-shopping
  - Unicre / Vector XXI, 2000.09.26, http://www.plano21.com/pd/estudosmercado/

- Inquiry on-line Ciberfaces
  - ISCTE, 1999.06.15, http://www.cav.iscte.pt/pt/documentos/inq1-res1/index.html

- Bareme Internet
  - Marktest, 2000.03.31, http://www.marktest.pt/Informacao/Bareme-Internet/Default.htm

- PortugalMail
  - PortugalMail Statistics, 2000.12.31, http://www.portugalmail.pt/marketing/Dez2000.htm

After analysing of the above documents, it is possible to reach the following conclusion:

In Portugal, there are about 1.000.000 regular e-mail users (10 % of the national population) and they can be characterized as follows:

- about 60% are male and 40% are female
- about 50% are under 30 years old
- about 60% are or have been College students
- those who have not access to Internet at home, are planning to do so in less than a year (85%)

I should emphasize that the growth in the number of users from 1999 to 2000 was about 50%.

The new way of communication and consequences for human relationships

E-mail is a new way of communication. It is revolutionizing the written form. Besides e-mail what we can use? Letter and fax. But the letter takes a few days to destination and fax can take minutes, hours or even days to the destination. Using e-mail, the message only takes a few minutes and can be sent to several persons.

It is a very powerful tool of communication, I have no doubt about that. An example? When I started this study I did wanted to know how many .pt domains are available. I searched the site of the institution who does the management of Portuguese domains, the www.fccn.pt and I searched everything related with this issue. I decided to use e-mail, asking for inquiries. On the same day, a person answered me saying the correct number (by the way, there are 14.500). If I didn't have e-mail, what would have happened? If I was really in need of the information I only have had two options: Either I would write a letter, or a fax, asking for that information or I would investigate by myself at any location. Either way, would take me much longer than looking e-mail inquires. I also think It is relevant to underline that the person who answered me does not actually know me, but the answers given was useful and quick.

In shorts, e-mail gives a new dimension to the concept of scope of a message and time - scale for replies.

But will we have only benefits through e-mail? I would like to point another example, where we can see clearly a sinister side affecting our way of life. In my opinion, over-using causes distance and even isolation amongst people.

I would like to give the example of the transformation business meetings. The personal presence is not always required, like it was some years ago. The possibility of issuing a statement or a guide work to several people at the same time and having the answer almost in real time, contributes to decrease the frequency of meetings. This fact changes in a very radical way the work habits, since the inter-personal relationships are left to a lower degree of importance.

Anthony Giddens, director of London School of Economics who is considered by many as having a crucial role in Tony Blair's New Labour Party, said in an interview to the magazine on-line Telepolis that as a result of the new technologies – like e-mail, phone mobiles, videoconferences, etc - we are assisting to the birth of a new economy based on "time". For Giddens, the new technologies are at the same time a sign of the theoretical impossibility of isolation towards the ability of being permanently reachable, providing an endless work. By this point of view, we would face the pressure of time in an economy where we could find both jobless and workaholic [http://www.telepolis.de/english/special/eco/6205/1.html].

I would compare my convictions to the metaphor *Organization as a Machine*. I believe that the new communication technology, where e-mail is involved, makes everything moving quickly:

"If we look at organizations like serrated wheels fitting all with each other, we feel the e-mail causes a quick movement in these wheels, giving it a velocity much more quicker to the wheel where a person is involved, and by all means, in all the wheels that the person touches".

Private Use/Professional

E-mail users usually access from office/school or from home. I access the e-mail from both places, but I separate the business e-mails that I deal in the office from the personal e-mails that I receive at home. I do this procedure, but I believe that most people do not.

Is it correct to use e-mail from office for personal benefit?
Can a worker use tools from the employing company for personal benefit?
The company can watch out the worker's e-mail?

Before I get into these questions, I propose the analysis of the following facts:

- A study from American company Yankelovich Partners shows that 62% of the workers with the internet access in the company are on-line for personal reasons at least once a day, while 20% get connected 10 or mores times everyday [www.yankelovich.com].

- A similar research by an Australian company Red Sheriff reveals that Australian workers loose at least 3,6 hours a week in the Internet for personal reasons [www.redsherrif.com].

- In 1999, in the American newspaper "The New York Times" 40 workers were laid-off because they were accused of sending e-mails considered inappropriate. The Company detected those messages, with the help of software (scanners).

- In the beginning of this year, the insurance company Royal and Sun Alliance fired 10 people and prosecuted disciplinary processes to other 70 people because they distributed by internal e-mail an obscene image and this Company had a policy towards this issue.

- The Australian Government published in March 30, 2000, one document about "Guidelines for the work place regarding e-mail, web and private use related with these issues". Very briefly, the contents are, the policy adopted should be very clear regarding the authorized and forbidden activities and the worker should be advised about what his/her boss can have Access.
  [http://www.privacy.gov.au/issues/p7_4.html].

We can face many problems when there exists indefinition about what is allowed and what is not. My opinion is the same like the Australian government has adopted, i.e., the company should make very clear what is allowed and what is not. When I refer to the company I am referring to it as a worker as myself, but I think it similar rules should apply to any private or public company, which the worker is paid.

If I was requested to made a decision about this issue, I would decide as follows:
- It would be allowed to use the company's account of e-mail for personal use, as long as there are some restrictions involved. The worker could send a short message to a relative or a friend, like this, for example: "Let's have dinner?", "Let's meet after work?", something along the lines of a phone call message which is a normal procedure and It is widely accepted.

- It would not be allowed to use the e-mail as a server for jokes in form of text or pictures. This kind of e-mail uses a lot of the network capacity and obviously, it means a pause during the working hours and it is important not to forget that those are paid working hours. Using the comparison with a telephone call it is not very well appreciated that, during the office hours, a worker is telling jokes.

- About the vigilance by the company, maybe this procedure would be necessary. If this does not happen, people less responsible feel free to do as well as they please. I think that is a necessary evil, but that is always under the assumption the worker understands that the message is being registered and It is possible to be scrutinized by the boss. Regarding the example of the phone call and relate this with a control-system idea, I verify that this really happens, because most of the time workers are surrounded by other people in the office and they work as an inhibition factor for this kind of calls.

Viruses by e-mail

This is one of the biggest problems of the Internet. I am referring to viruses that are spread by e-mail and usually damage the data and the software of the PC's. When I consider it in computer industry as a whole, I believe I am not exaggerating because the biggest problem is the disgrace that provokes in the industry. Even if the viruses does not attack all the systems, like those who are based in Unix, or simply works as data bases like Oracle or SAP, the viruses also does affect them. Do you know how?

They put the computer industry very vulnerable when the news on the mass media comes like this: "Informatics virus destroys thousand of computers and causes damages worth in millions". What does this kind of news achieve? Discredits the computer industry!

My functions in the company where I work are, in a way, also commercial because one goal is the selling as well. Very recently, I was speaking with a potential client and he told me: "I am not sure if we would like to invest in information systems because we feel that, in the end of the road, we can loose all the information in such a very short period of time. Have you seen what the virus ILOVEYOU has done? It destroyed the information from a lot of computers, many of them were placed in the biggest companies. I am beginning to doubt whether the computers is something solid and safe..."

I did explained to the gentleman that ILOVEYOU virus attacked mostly personal computers and that the biggest systems were not affected because the servers do not usually have the e-mail programs, running and working. But he's not the only person who has doubts on how secure computer systems are…

In fact, I understand the fears of all the non-informatics persons, and also the informatics technician. And these are valid fears, It is not any invention. Regardless, e-mail and Internet in general came to develop the problem because nowadays It is very easy to spread the viruses.

How we can fight this problem?

It is not easy. About the problem of ILOVEYOU virus, or any other viruses, the main concern is that the anti-virus work under a re-activity logic, i.e., only works out in viruses that are known already. Only after the anti-virus we can found the antidote and introduce it in the computer. Even like the system where the e-mail program is based in a more advanced field, other forms of infection can come. It is the same logic as for diseases. The virus starts, then the anti-virus is found and only after It is possible to create a vaccine to prevent the disease. Therefore, only when the virus is known it is possible to do something. I can't point any easy solution... even when arresting the culprits the problem does not end, so there will be other law-breakers because it is always possible to fight the system. Maybe the only solution is to teach the professional ethic and through this way get to the point: transmit the message that viruses are harmful to everybody. I believe this a very important idea to pass on to every student, as soon as they start working with computers.

Conclusions

In Portugal, e-mail is definitely a new way of communication that is growing very fast.

It makes communication a lot easier among people who does not know each other or are very far from each other. It is also incredibly easier to ask information to any institution, whether It is private or public, and It is possible being much more informal in the request rather than using a fax or a letter as well as we should consider the easy side of the procedure in sending the message.

However, e-mail can put people apart even like the people who work together and prefer to use this apparent improved form of communication. In e-mail everything is much quicker, we can anticipate business or news, but, I dare to ask, at what cost?

What do we loose to get everything in the quickest way?

E-mail improves the time of communication between people but these same people spend more time by themselves because the communication is done on the computer. As we depend much less on the presence of other people, we can work more. As we have better and better work tools and theoretically we have more amount of information, we also are able to do more functions, working even more. We spend more time alones, more time at work, breaking with the way life has been up ton now. From a human point of view, we become poorer. Most of the times, we pay less attention to the family. Are you one of these cases?

I believe that governments should have an active role in the regulation of these issues. So far, there has been a lack of legislation and therefore these subjects rely on those who dominate the market (whether we like it or not, in a new-liberal politics, the market rules). It seems important to me, however, that users in general should pay attention to this new reality, being able to discuss what kind of future they want, and through this open discussion maybe the governments can provide the social logic that we should have.

I strongly believe in the power of e-mail and in general, in the influence of all the new technologies. By all means, this influence comes with a positive or a negative effect. It all depends on the way we use it.