Networking: E-mail is the 'new telephone'

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Ten years ago Mark J. Grossman's office was alive with the sound of ringing phones and chatter from account executives placing sales calls. "The prevailing sound today is 'click, click, click,'" said Grossman, who heads Grossman Strategies in Bohemia, N.Y.

E-mail is the new telephone -- the dominant communications medium for many businesses today -- as employees labor away, typing on PCs rather than dialing for dollars, experts tell UPI's Networking.

"Not only is e-mail the preferred choice of communications in business, it will soon become the driver of revenue for telcos," said Brian Bogosian, chief executive officer of Visto Corp. "If we listen to the warnings from analysts and industry pundits, the telecommunications industry is not going to make any money from what it was originally designed for -- voice services. The future of telecommunications services across the board is data services, of which e-mail is a critical element."

That is putting a strain on computer networks -- never conceived initially to handle the kind of traffic that is prevalent today. Companies have to spend money on anti-virus technologies, IT personnel and other defensive measures to ensure that the networks remain online.

The cost of communications is not really going down -- though productivity appears to be going up substantially. That needs to change in the long term in order for the networking boom to continue. "Ultimately, e-mail access needs to be cost-effective," said Bogosian,

based in Redwood City, Calif. "Installation of proprietary e-mail systems, such as Blackberry e-mail, can incur significant costs outside usage, which include additional hardware, additional network configuration, the cost of buying mobile proprietary devices, and an expensive monthly support bill."

Other costs that are increased are paper-and-ink costs in the office, as well as the wear and tear on office equipment, like PCs and printers.

There may also be a cost to human relationships, experts said. "We spent 3 million years in groups of 25-45 people, and our ability to react to nonverbal and paralinguistic communication of others is central to our ability to receive and send accurately," Douglas Raybeck, a professor of psychological anthropology at Hamilton College in Clinton, N.Y., told Networking. "A phone is a poor substitute for another's presence, and with e-mail you lose even voice tone."

That, of course, has led to the development of emoticons, those smiley faces and other signs that "designate the message intent," said Raybeck. Still, there are studies that suggest that e-mail significantly enhances the likelihood of a message being misinterpreted, he added.

There is, however, an upside to e-mail communication that may ease any fear of misinterpretation of one's message. "E-mail provides a soothing sense of completion," Rita Gunther McGrath, co-author of "MarketBusters: 40 Strategic Moves that Drive Exceptional Business Growth," told Networking. "With today's hectic office lifestyles, the chance of reaching someone on the telephone the first time around are minimal. With e-mail, one just hits the 'send' button and feels that the message has been delivered."

E-mail is best used to convey factual information, rather than emotional stories, said Gunther McGrath, who is a professor at Columbia Business

School at Columbia University in New York City. This may be a huge improvement over trying to leave a message with a confused secretary. "Anyone who has ever had to try to leave a message with a human being knows that the chance of information being incorrect is pretty high," said Gunther McGrath.

One thing that networks are going to do more of in the future -- and are starting to do now -- is provide information on the location of the person to whom an e-mail is being sent. This is known as their network "presence," experts said. "By providing precious context information, such as availability to communicate location, and what device a person is using, presence has filled the void as a means to synchronize people and information all in real-time," said Kevin McLaughlin, managing partner at Public I Partners, a marketing communications firm based in Princeton, N.J., in an e-mail message to Networking.

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