

End of the e-mail era? I'm not buying it

November 19 2009, By Troy Wolverton

I don't know about you, but I'm overwhelmed by e-mail. Yes, I know. The Wall Street Journal has declared that e-mail's reign is over. It's supposedly being replaced by technologies such as instant messaging, social networking and Twitter.

And it's not just the Journal that's proclaiming the end of e-mail as we know it. Thanks to the increase in time we spend on these newer communications services, the Radicati Group, a technology research firm, tells us that we're spending much less time with e-mail.

But I don't buy it. My in-boxes are as full as they've ever been.

I'm not the only one who's skeptical. Research group IDC recently scoffed at the notion that e-mail's day is past, comparing the Journal's headline to the infamous one in the Chicago Tribune erroneously announcing, "Dewey defeats Truman."

The number of e-mail messages sent worldwide continues to climb steadily, IDC noted. The average business user now sends or receives 114 e-mail messages a day.

That's just the average. Some of us get a lot more.

At work I typically send and receive 200 to 250 messages a day. And I'm not talking about spam. Fortunately, our spam filters here work pretty well, so nearly all of the messages I receive are legitimate. They run from news releases to reader requests to meeting schedulings to personal

notes from friends.

I also get e-mails from social networks. As much as those networks may represent new forms of communication, they often rely on good old-fashioned e-mail to alert you when you've got new friends or messages on the services.

Add all these up, and I'm spending two hours a day -- at least -- combing through e-mail. And if I don't, I'm punished by adding to the backlog.

I often tune out e-mail while writing a story or column -- only to find that 20 to 40 new messages have piled up while I was ignoring my inbox. I almost dread leaving the office or going on vacation because of the daunting task I'll face when I return: hundreds of e-mail messages to handle.

And that's just work. I've nearly abandoned my Yahoo mail account because I couldn't keep up with all the marketing pitches and mailing list messages. I rarely check my Gmail account for the same reason. I do check an e-mail account linked to my personal Web address, but still the unanswered e-mails pile up.

The growing overload has changed my attitude toward e-mail. I still acknowledge how useful it can be. I still love how easy it has made sending a note to a writer I follow or to my family and friends. And many of my story and column ideas originated or were facilitated through e-mail.

But it has made communication almost too easy. People who would never have thought about calling or writing me longhand send me e-mail messages now.

And the giant time drain of responding steals time away from my

reporting and writing -- not to mention my family life.

My situation is probably worse than most. My e-mail address is appended to every article I write, so I probably get a lot more unsolicited e-mail than most folks. But I've got to believe that other folks are feeling the same way I do.

Yes, there are steps that can be taken to better manage e-mail. You can unsubscribe to marketing mailing lists -- at least those from legitimate marketers -- through a link they are required to include on their messages. With mailing lists for discussion groups and some online services, you can choose to receive a digest of a day's worth of messages, rather than getting an e-mail for each individual message sent to the list. And you can also use the rules feature within Outlook and other e-mail programs to filter messages as they come in, sending them to particular folders, which can allow you to prioritize particular types of messages.

But these steps don't solve the problem. The only solution would be for all of us to stop using e-mail so much.

And, the Journal's assessment aside, that's just not going to happen.

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