

Hand over your email inbox to boost productivity, researchers say

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

(Phys.org) —Most people are comfortable handing over their car keys to a complete stranger. Valet service is convenient, professional and reliable. But personal information, such as the contents of your email inbox, is a different story, right?

Not according to Stanford [computer scientists](#). Experiments show that email users are happy to allow a stranger to access practically all of their incoming emails, if it boosts their productivity. The research results, presented recently at a [social computing conference](#) in San Antonio, Texas, suggest a new frontier in "crowdsourcing" where a [personal assistant](#) is available to anyone.

Stanford doctoral student Nicolas Kokkalis found his email load overwhelming after founding online [game platform](#) Gameyola. A personal assistant, he thought, could sort through his emails and filter out the important tasks.

He explored the possibility of delegating (or crowdsourcing) this job to online contract workers. Websites like oDesk, Elance and Amazon's Mechanical Turk connect employers who outline a specific short-term task with contractors willing to complete it.

Kokkalis was wary.

"It was easy to hire people online, through oDesk and other platforms, but it was difficult to actually trust somebody to help me with that. What if they change the password of my account? Or to my bank account?"

Kokkalis' dilemma is common in the new field of online crowdsourcing, said computer science Assistant Professor Michael Bernstein.

Breaking down barriers

"We're trying to break down a wall that has been up with crowdsourcing. It's uncomfortable sharing very private data," Bernstein said.

Kokkalis, with his adviser Scott Klemmer, Bernstein and others at Stanford's Human-Computer Interaction group, sought to break this

barrier by crowdsourcing the contents of an [email](#) inbox.

In their EmailValet application, users hire a remote personal assistant who reads the emails and extracts tasks, which appear in a convenient to-do list.

Whoa – reads the user's emails?

Much like a valet key limits a stranger's access to certain areas of the car, EmailValet preserves the user's control over which emails the assistant sees. Emails from banks or family and friends could be blocked. Further, all of the assistant's actions are recorded, providing a transparent record.

In surveys of nearly 600 people (recruited through Mechanical Turk), only 4 percent of surveyed participants were willing to turn over all of their incoming emails to an assistant.

But in an actual weeklong study involving 28 testers, the participants changed their attitude as the week progressed.

One user originally restricted emails from her boyfriend, but later allowed her assistant to see them after realizing that his emails also contained important tasks. By the end of the study, only 10 percent of participants felt that a user might drop EmailValet over privacy concerns. Some users even communicated details of their life to their assistants, such as their job, or hometown, to give the assistants the right context.

"That's how they got value out of the system," Bernstein said. "It's a reminder that privacy and security are negotiated. If you give me enough benefit, I'm willing to share a little bit of information with you."

Facebook, Kokkalis said, is a perfect example. "Before Facebook, my friends were very cautious about telling others what they've been doing all day." Now people document their every action for the world to see.

Productivity boost

Kokkalis and his team found that users accomplished twice as many tasks with EmailValet's help than if they sorted the emails themselves.

"What this tells me," said Klemmer, an associate professor of computer science, "is that information overload is a significant barrier to people's productivity."

In the past, Klemmer said, assistants to white-collar executives performed many of the tasks that technology now allows everyone to do, such as typing documents or preparing presentation slides.

"[EmailValet] now shows a path forward for using technology to bring back some of that invisible value that got lost in terms of organizing and implementing help," he said.

Study results showed that one assistant could handle more than 20 inboxes at once, lowering the potential cost of the service.

EmailValet's developers can't guarantee security. If a valet wants to steal your car, he can.

"Continuing to understand when this breaks down and when it really does work is going to be super important to getting people to trust these kinds of systems," Bernstein said.

If the idea of a stranger reading your brother-in-law's latest travelogue from Hawaii gives you the willies, EmailValet may not be for you.

"There's no need to use a system like this unless you want to," Kokkalis said.

In the face of smarter and smarter machines helping with more and more of our daily tasks, Klemmer points to crowdsourcing as an example that humans still command a realm of tasks beyond the reach of computers. People are adept at nuance and context, he said, that still stymie the best machines.

"A lot of the exigencies of daily life require a humble creativity that machines don't yet have," Klemmer said.

More information: hci.stanford.edu/publications/...ilValet-CSCW2013.pdf

Provided by Stanford University

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