

Straight Talking - Social media and email: stop the banal, irksome, trivial and stupid intrusions

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Do we need a time management system for the digital age?

When you're been brought up with some IT industry certainties, such as Moore's Law of transistor doubling or Metcalfe's Law of network value, it can be daunting to realise that these laws can have other unintended, but significant, consequences.

Metcalfe's Law says that the value of a telecoms network increases with the square of the number of connections. Whether that rule is precise or not has been subject of some debate, with various proponents of different formulae, but that is not the point.

It has always been pretty clear from the days of the telegraph to phone, fax, web connection or mobile phone that each of these networks pass some sort of tipping point as the number of users soars when the network becomes mainstream.

Impact on individual users

However, while the total value of each network grows - and that's great for all those providing products or services in the supply chain - how does it affect individual users? There is for each individual the increasing value in being able to reach more and more contacts within the one medium.

After all, being the only person on the planet with a fax machine is pretty useless, but when there's a few others it becomes marginally interesting, and when all business associates have one it becomes a powerful tool.

But is there a downside to network connection ubiquity?

Clearly some networks become stretched to breaking point as available resources struggle to

cope with the demands of increasing numbers of users.

Some mobile networks in particular have been hard hit, dealing with surges in new users or new mobile application usage, with the iPhone and Android platforms being cases in point.

Impact on the value of networks

The problem is, once people have a new, highly flexible tool, it is difficult to predict the variety of innovative uses to which it will be put.

This issue is especially true of communications devices where it is even harder to predict the speed at which innovation will propagate.

But something other than stretched resources is starting to affect the value of networks: a corollary of Metcalfe's Law is that the larger the physical network of connection points, the larger the social network of people.

This relationship can prove really useful, as it increases the likelihood for example of someone having an answer to that tricky question, or someone being interested in a particular quirky subject, but it also increases the volume of the banal, irksome, trivial and stupid - in short, the more chaff there is to disguise the wheat.

Automatically generated rubbish

There are further problems in that some of the rubbish clogging the system can be automatically generated such as spam or email updates that have been signed up for but later regretted - sometimes referred to as bacon. This rubbish propagates rapidly and it is not at all easy to distinguish from valuable communication.

Whether it is search engine results, friend requests, emails or interstitial web pages, there will be some that are too important to miss hidden amid the noise.

Thus as the physical network continues to grow in size its social value growth is affected by increasing viscosity. If there is wisdom in the crowd, the sheer numbers makes progress towards it feel like running through treacle.

At a personal level the effects are pretty clear: constant interruptions, alerts and messages which we deal with by calling it multi-tasking, endless trawling through search engine hits to try to find the thing we were really looking for and so many emails that we fear going on holiday or mitigate the fear by taking a BlackBerry and not really having a proper break.

Real-world inefficiencies

In many respects this is analogous to the real-world inefficiencies of meetings having too many attendees or the old adage about a camel being a horse designed by committee. However, in both those instances we have built strategies and tools to cope with their worst effects.

At least in theory, although many fail to put them into practice, which is why the Video Arts short training film from the 1990s "Meetings bloody meetings" still resonates today.

Now remember that the goal of deploying technology was to be MORE productive, not just to have more prods, dead ducks and activities.

This goal means that some artificial constraints may have to be placed on all of this networking, so that personal as well as corporate productivity does not unduly suffer.

It is unlikely that a binary switch – banning social networking during office hours, switching off corporate mobile email during holidays – will work or even be desirable, but just like the filters that have been put in place for the unwelcome deluge of spam, something automatic will be required.

Risk to productivity

There are already some social media and content filtering tools and services available, although mostly emerging from the need to curtail access or protect data. These are generally deployed by IT, network and security specialists and justified on the grounds of reducing risks and vulnerability.

However given the increasing risk to productivity at both a personal and organisational level, a new set of tools - or interfaces to existing filters - needs to emerge to be marketed and sold to the line of business management, human resources and individual employees.

It is no longer a technical sell, but if presented and positioned correctly could be knocking on an open door. A flexible and easy-to-use time management solution for the digital age - perhaps Filofax 2.0? - would be most welcome.

About Quocirca

Quocirca is a primary research and analysis company specialising in the business impact of information technology and communications (ITC). With world-wide, native language reach, Quocirca provides in-depth insights into the views of buyers and influencers in large, mid-sized and small organisations. Its analyst team is made up of real-world practitioners with first hand experience of ITC delivery who continuously research and track the industry and its real usage in the markets.

Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation's environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca's mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

Quocirca has a pro-active primary research programme, regularly surveying users, purchasers and resellers of ITC products and services on emerging, evolving and maturing technologies. Over time, Quocirca has built a picture of long term investment trends, providing invaluable information for the whole of the ITC community.

Quocirca works with global and local providers of ITC products and services to help them deliver on the promise that ITC holds for business. Quocirca's clients include Oracle, Microsoft, IBM, O2, T-Mobile, HP, Xerox, EMC, Symantec and Cisco, along with other large and medium sized vendors, service providers and more specialist firms.

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