E-mail Basics & Options Important to EMS

By William E. Ott

What we now know as e-mail was an original objective of the Internet, known in the late 1960s and early '70s as ARPANet ([Defense] Advanced Research Projects Agency Network). In 1971, an electronic note was transmitted by engineer Ray Tomlinson from his office at ARPANet prime contractor Bolt Beranek and Newman in Massachusetts to 14 sites around the country then connected to the network, ushering in the e-mail age.

Tomlinson is credited with the creation of the first electronic messaging system that traversed a network to reach other sites. Refined versions of the original package are still in use at some educational and industrial settings. Tomlinson also developed the concept of using the "@" symbol to specify destination address information.

Since delivery of that first message, e-mail has become the most used of all computer applications. It's an efficient means of communication, because messages can be sent directly to other parties without the obligatory chit-chat required of meetings or phone calls.

Drawbacks

E-mail does have drawbacks. First, the inherent lack of personal contact can cause misunderstandings. Often, when someone is upset, they'll fire off an e-mail and say things in a tone they would never use in person. Many people feel e-mail gives them a feeling of power or security because they're not in the presence of the receiving party. *Use tip:* Always send or

reply to e-mail using a professional tone and manner. It's a good idea to wait 24 hours before writing or replying to something that has made you upset, so your writing is based more on logic than emotion. If a situation stirs up a lot of emotion, then a meeting or phone call might better serve your task than an e-mail.

Second, e-mail never really goes away; a copy is usually stored away on a mail server or backup tape somewhere. An e-mail sent in anger will likely come back to haunt you.

Third, remember that for work situations, courts have clearly sided with employers concerning their right to monitor and read e-mail sent and received on their network or equipment. So even if personal e-mail use is allowed at work, use discretion when discussing romances, finances or other personal topics on your employer's gear because you could be providing great entertainment to the IT staff. *Use tip:* Never write or send anything you would be embarrassed to read on the front page of the local paper tomorrow.

Good rules of thumb

Another rule to follow for good e-mail etiquette is to never type in all capital letters BECAUSE IT APPEARS AS THOUGH YOU ARE SHOUTING. You should capitalize only when it's grammatically correct or for special emphasis. Also, place a brief but pertinent subject statement in the subject line of your e-mail messages. Having a subject makes for

easier retrieval of messages days or weeks after they were originally sent if the recipient needs to review them for some reason.

Off-site options

Many options help you keep up with your e-mail when at work, out of town, at a friend's house, etc. Most IT departments can arrange for you to login to your work e-mail via a Web browser or directly with an e-mail client. Many ISPs offer a Web-mail option so you can read and reply to your e-mail from any browser. Many ISPs also offer a voice system that allows you to hear your mail read electronically over the phone.

Several other alternatives allow you to stay caught up with your e-mail without lugging a notebook computer around everywhere. Several Web services, such as www.hotmail.com and www.yahoo.com, allow you to create Web-mail accounts that can be configured to log into your work or personal mail account. Also, such fee-based services as www.certifiedmail.com and www.hushmail.com offer additional enhanced services, such as digital signatures for non-repudiation issues, encryption, and return and read receipts that take e-mail to a higher level of functionality.

Other options for e-mail when on the road can be found at www.pocketmail.com. That site offers a small pocket organizer e-mail device that can be used with any phone to send and retrieve mail. It also allows e-mail account aggregation. Another device is the BlackBerry e-mail pager, a small, two-way pager with a keyboard that is constantly

connected to the Cingular wireless data network. The Blackberry pager

delivers your e-mail and allows you to respond in real time from the field.

BlackBerry is made by Research in Motion (www.rim.com) with service

provided through various paging companies.

In traveling about the country, I've come to appreciate hotels with

nice business centers, typically those with new PCs and broadband

Internet access. I usually have a notebook with me, but if I'm only at the

hotel for a few hours sleep before moving on, I've been learning to use the

business center's faster computer to contact www.certifiedmail.com or

using the browser to access my company e-mail server through our secure

Web portal, rather than firing up my notebook and dialing out or

connecting to the in-room DSL. Try to stay at hotels offering broadband in

every room and those with nice, open-all-hours business centers because it

can save a lot of time and hassle.

Summary

Many options are available to stay in touch via e-mail, whether from

home, work or on the road. I encourage you to take a look at some of the

services I've mentioned—or others because there are obviously many

more that I haven't mentioned. Staying connected to your e-mail is

inexpensive (and sometimes free, depending on your needs). Configuring

and using these services is easy and straightforward.

I'll detail e-mail-specific technical issues, such as digital signatures, non-repudiation, digital return receipts and their role in the health-care and privacy settings, in a future column.

William Ott is president and chief consultant of CPCS Technologies, a N.C.-based technology consultancy providing services to the public safety and defense communities. He has been involved in EMS since 1981, in field, education and administrative capacities. Contact him at ejems@cpcstech.com.