The Art of Communications and Email

Electronic mail is my favorite application of the Internet. My favorite question to a new set of students used to be: 'What's the difference between the World Wide Web and the Internet?' It shows the ignorance of the media that very few students could even differentiate the two. By now you should realize that the World Wide Web (the Web, Cyber Space, and so on) and the Internet are two different things. The World Wide Web is really just one of the applications of the Internet. Others include remote access, remote diagnostics, and, of course, electronic mail. For most the best application of the Internet is electronic mail. It has really enhanced business communications, and, like the telephone, has changed the way people operate.

One of the most amazing things about electronic mail is how quickly it was adopted as a world standard, and how well it has changed from being the domain of computer specialists to become usable by virtually every person who owns, or uses a computer. The keys to this success have been the adoption of TCP/IP as a standard transport mechanism, and, of course, the adoption of the RFC821 and RFC822 standards. These two simple protocols have allowed for electronic e-mail to be transferred between different systems, and different e-mail clients. Without them we may have been forced to adopt industry-driven standards. But, as we know, the Internet is the greatest open system, ever. It thrives on its openness, and worldwide standards. No one owns the Internet, and no one ever will. If anyone tries to dominate, they will be immediately shouted down, either by governments or by the users of the Internet.

Given that RFC821 and RFC822 were based on text-type messages, no one would have really expected that they would eventually support file attachments, and, even graphics and binary programs. MIME has done this successfully, but it has done it in the way that still makes the e-mail compatible with all previous standards. For a while, electronic mails became a bit messy, as not all e-mail systems were quite compatible with the new MIME standards, but with new versions the integration is almost seamless. Now, e-mail messages can be sent as HTML documents, with hypertext links, colored backgrounds, and colored text. To be totally compatible it is often best to send text messages in text format, as you can never guarantee that the recipient is fully compatible with the message format that you are sending. POP-3 has since enhanced the reception of e-mail, as it supports a simple message transfer system which allows many different types of programs to access POP-3 initialized servers. Typically WWW browsers are now used to download e-mail messages.

Electronic mail requires a different culture than traditional methods of communications. The key difference is that there is no immediate feedback (as there would be with a telephone call), and that messages can be sent within a relatively short time. These two things cause considerable problems, and most people have sent e-mails which have either been construed the wrong way or

have sent messages which they quickly regret ('acting-on-the-spot'). So, as words of advice, try not to send e-mails without first thinking about their consequences (typically, allow yourself a cooling-off period before you blast users with an e-mail that you may later regret), and carefully read what you have written, so that it cannot be construed in the wrong way.

One way to lighten-up an e-mail, and to show that you are not being too serious is to use smilies, some of which are given next. For example, someone sending a lighthearted e-mail about not getting a job might say:

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Well, thanks for your advice, but it didn't help because I
didn't get the job. So I don't think I'll be asking you
again.

-- Fred Smith.
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Might get construed as abusive, as the person sounds as if they are really saying that they do not want any more advice from the person. A smilie, or two, can help to lighten the tone of the e-mail, and show that it should not be taken too seriously:

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Well, thanks for your advice, but it didn't help because I
didn't get the job (:-<). So I don't think I'll be asking
you again ;-).

-- Fred (:->)
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The Internet has also brought Netiquette, which is a whole new language. Users of chat programs often use acronyms for commonly used words. When I first started using the Internet I was lost for a while, as users kept saying things like LOL and ROFL. I didn't know that they actually thought that I was saying something funny. I thought that they were offering me a lolly (in the UK, a kind of Popsicle), and asking about my roof. Soon I realized that BTW was By The Way, and not some new fast food meal. Well, here goes:

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IMHO, BTW, IRL I LOL when I C Some1 FTF . GTG. EOD. HAND

-- WB.
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One of the great advantages of e-mail, is that people who contact me get my name right. A good old Scottish name like Buchanan (pro. Bu-cannon), can come out in many different ways over the telephone, my Top 5 are:

1. Butch-an-an-a (I don't know where the last -a comes from, but I think it just comes out)
2. Butch-an-in.
3. Buk-hana-an.

4. Butch-anon.
5. Buchan-on.

I must admit I love e-mail, because it is really the art of the written word. Many people though, abuse the great gift of e-mail, which is a real shame. The four top abusers are:

Mr or Mrs Anonymous.
These are people who either generate anonymous e-mail ac-counts and then use these to send abusive e-mails to someone or are people who send e-mails from their own account but use another person's e-mail address as the sender. It is relatively simple to set up the sending e-mail address of a user to anything that a user wants (and pretend to be anyone that they want). Governments of the worlds are quickly realizing that this type of activity is a serious crime, and laws will soon be put in place to try and reduce the number of people who do this. I have seen several abuses of the e-mail system with this method. Luckily all of them were traced, as the users could be traced from their IP address, and the time that they sent the e-mail. So remember, sys-tems keep trace of when users log in, and their IP address. Once an administrator has this information it is relatively easy to catch an abuser. There are many clues in the header of the e-mail address which can trace the original sender of an e-mail message, as the header contains the original server, as well as times and dates of transfers. Several e-mail systems now detect that a user is using a different e-mail address. A level of security is also provided by some ISPs who will only allow an e-mail message to be sent from a specific telephone number.

Spammers R Us.
Spammers are everywhere; they either do it unintentionally or intentionally. The worst type is the one which intentionally sends out e-mails to many users at a time, without first checking to see if they really want the information.

Mr and Mrs IdiotUser.
These two people tend to be the type that reply back to an e-mail message, and rather than sending to the person who sent the e-mail, they send it to everyone on the circulation list. This can be very embarrassing, and, for the recipients, annoying.

Mr LackofManners.
This tends to the type of user who writes e-mail as he speaks. I've seen lots of examples of this, and a few tips that I have are: always refer to someone using either their first name, or their official title; always reply with a courteous re-sponse (even although you may be fuming and wish to punch them in the face). Words such as: 'Thank you for your e-mail', 'I respect your option', 'I agree with you to a certain extent', are much better than: 'I've just wasted two hours of my precious life reading, and replying to your abusive e-mail', 'You're the next highest life form to a slug', 'I wanted to send you a more fulsome response, but

your firewall would probably not allow through some of the words that I would like to say'.

E-mail is still a relatively new technology, and unlike many technological advances, it is actually changing the way we work. Thus it will take a while to truly evolve, and like TCP/IP it is one of the true liberators in the world, as it allows the people of the world to intercom-municate, and share ideas. In the past governments have build virtual walls around their country in order to control the information that flows into and out of a country. TCP and IP are, of course, open to anyone reading the messages contained in their communications, but with encryption, not even a space alien could read the message (unless, of course, it was destined for them!).

:-) smile
:-> sarcastic
;-) wink
:-))) laughing or double chin
:.-) laughing tears
;-)=) grin
:-D laughing
:-} wry smile
:-P tongue
:-(sad, angry
:-< sad
:-I indifferent/sad
:.-(weeping
:-II angry
:-@ angry
}-) evil
:-X mute
:-() talking
:-O surprised/shocked
=:-) shocked
O:-) halo
:-3 has eaten a lemon
:-/ skeptical
:-Z sleeping
:-x kissing
:-* sorry, I didn't want to say that
?-(sorry, I don't know what went wrong
:*) drunk (red nose)
%-) stared too long at monitor
#-) dead
X-) unconscious
:-Q smoking
(:-) bald

.-) one-eyed
-:-) punk
<:-) stupid question (donkey's hat)
<|-) chinese
@:-) arab
8:-) little girl
:-)-8 big girl
[:-] robot
::-) wearing glasses
8-) wearing glasses/wide-eyed grin
B-) horn-rimmed glasses
B:-) sunglasses on head
.^) side view
:<) moustache
_O-) aquanaut
{:-) wig
:-E vampire
:-[vampire
(-: left-handed
:o) boxer's nose
:) happy
[:] robot
:] gleep, friendly
=) variations on a theme
:} (what should we call these?)
:> (what?)
:@ (what?)
:D laughter
:I hmmm...
:(sad

Acronym Description
2U2 to you, too
AAMOF as a matter of fact
AFAIK as far as I know
AFK away from keyboard
ASAP as soon as possible
BBL be back later
BOT back on topic
BRB be right back
BTW by the way
BYORL bring your own rocket launcher
C4N ciao for now
CFD call for discussion
CFV call for vote
CU see you
CUL see you later

CYA see ya
DIY do it yourself
EOD end of discussion
EOT end of transmission
F2F face to face
FAI frequently argued issue
FAQ frequently asked questions
FOAF friend of a friend
FWIW for what it's worth
FYI for your information
GAL get a life
GFC going for coffee
GRMBL grumble
GTG got to go
HAND have a nice day
HTH hope this helps
IAC in any case
IC I see
IDGI I don't get it
IMHO in my humble opinion
IMNSHO in my not so humble opinion
IMO in my opinion
IMPE in my previous/personal experience
IMVHO in my very humble opinion
IOW in other words
IRL in real life
KISS keep it simple stupid
LOL laughing out loud
NC no comment
ONNA oh no, not again!
OOTC obligatory on-topic content
OTOH on the other hand
REHI hello again (re-Hi!)
ROFL rolling on the floor laughing
RTDox read the documentation
SHTSI somebody had to say it
SO significant other
THX thanks
TIA thanks in advance
TLA three letter acronym
TOS terms of service
TTFN ta-ta for now
TTYL talk to you later
WIIWD what it is we do
WWDWIIWD when we do what it is we do
YGWYPF you get what you pay for

IMO YGWYPF and THX 4 reading this page. Well, C4N.

-- William J.Buchanan, Jan 21, 2001