

The trouble with office email

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By Geoff Nairn

Published: February 17 2011 19:52 | Last updated: February 17 2011 19:52

In an unprecedented move to reduce information overload, Atos Origin, European IT services company, plans to ban employees from using email for internal communications.

The ban will affect more than 50,000 employees although it will not take affect until 2014.

Thierry Breton, chief executive of Atos Origin, argues the ban is necessary because the volume of email circulating inside his company is now "unsustainable", causing managers to spend between five and 25 hours a week just reading and writing emails.

He told employees earlier this month that the company intends to eradicate emails between employees within three years. Email will still be used for external communications but employees will be expected to use collaboration and social media tools instead of email to communicate with fellow co-workers.

"It is clearly going to be a big challenge for us because email is everywhere," says Marc-Henri Desportes, executive vice-president for global innovation at Atos Origin.

Many large organisations, such as chipmaker Intel and Australia's science agency CSIRO have experimented with "no email" days in a bid to encourage employees to find other ways to communicate.

But such initiatives can backfire if employees simply postpone sending and reading their emails until the next day. "No Email Fridays lead to More Email Mondays," says Matt Cain, lead email analyst at the Gartner consultancy.

For that reason Atos Origin has decided that a complete ban is the only way to stem the rising tide of email which threatens to hit productivity.

A recent survey, conducted by legal information firm Lexis-Nexis, found information overload was a widespread and growing problem among white collar workers around the globe. Six out of ten workers said the constant flow of email distracting them from concentrating on the task in hand.

While few businesses have yet to follow Atos Origin's radical example, many organisations are looking at ways to reduce their excessive dependence on email, particularly for routine internal communications.

"Email has its place but not as a catch-all communications tool," says Michael Redding, global managing director for R&D at consultancy Accenture. For example, email was never designed for real-time communications as anyone who has tried to urgently get hold of a colleague by email will know.

Better alternatives to email have existed for some time but as they are less widespread, they are a lot less useful — Catch 22.

Microsoft developed NetMeeting, a real-time communications suite back in 1996. "But no one used it," says Mr Redding.

Fifteen years later, its successor Office Communication Server is finally beginning to change the way organisations communicate internally.

Atos Origin, for example, plans to use the instant messaging and web conferencing capabilities of OCS to carry a lot of the internal communications that were previously carried by email.

Just as email has today largely displaced voicemail for leaving messages, Mr Redding argues newer technologies will also sideline email.

By 2014, Gartner predicts social networking services will replace e-mail as the principal method of interpersonal communications for 20 per cent of business users.

Mr Desportes says this shift is already evident in Atos Origin particularly with workers under 30 — the so-called Generation Y. "These people do not use email any more. They use social media tools," he says.

The growing use of consumer-oriented platforms such as Twitter and Facebook by businesspeople has spawned a new generation of enterprise social software tools such as Yammer, Socialtext and Chatter.

Atos Origin is looking at using Spigit, a collaboration tool designed for "innovation management". Jive Software offers a similar product.

Atos Origin argues the widespread use of these tools can reduce the amount of email by between 10 and 20 per cent.

Nevertheless, Gartner is unsure whether enterprise social networking tools will significantly reduce email volumes. "All the evidence of reduced email use to date is anecdotal," says Mr Cain.

It is clear that email is not going to disappear overnight, and so there is growing interest in tools that allow users to manage their bulging mailboxes.

Conventional email programs and newer cloud-based services such as Gmail let users organise incoming email using folders and filters. But most people cannot be bothered or do not know how to set up the filters, says Sara Radicati, CEO of analyst firm Radicati Group.

That has spurred the development of "inbox management solutions" that automate the filtering.

For example, ClearContext offers a plug-in for Microsoft Exchange that highlights important email and automatically files unimportant email from automated senders. In similar vein, Google recently added a "priority in-tray" feature to Gmail that tries to guess which emails are most important.

"These solutions may help high-volume mail users but the risk is they simply move the problem to another level. At the end of the day, a lot of the problems with email come down to user education," says Ms Radicati.

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