

Rethinking the Inbox

We aren't going to give up email. But we can be a lot smarter about the way we use it.

By Michael Totty

FOR YEARS, EXPERTS have been pushing a simple solution for email overload: Use other programs.

If your inbox is overflowing, they say, use more-specialized software to talk to your co-workers, such as a shared online work space where you can chat electronically without generating dozens of emails. Or just—heaven forbid—pick up the telephone.

But most workers haven't listened. For all its faults, email has become as comfortable as an old shoe, an easy way to communicate with co-workers, friends and just about everyone else.

Now a new crop of software is approaching the problem from a fresh angle. The programs aim to improve email's usefulness and reduce overload, while recognizing that users aren't about to abandon the familiarity of their inbox. These new products, from the leading email providers and some tech upstarts, integrate a host of other software tools into the regular email window—so you have access to instant messaging, discussion groups and a range of other software without leaving your inbox behind.

"To be successful, new collaboration tools need to empower people to share information and work together, without requiring them to give up email entirely," says Mark Levitt, vice president for collaborative computing and the enterprise workplace at research company IDC.

Electronic mail was invented in 1971, but wasn't widely adopted by businesses until the late 1980s, with the arrival of Lotus Notes and other programs. Since then, its use in the corporate world has exploded: Research firm Radicati Group Inc. estimates the average corporate email user sent and received about 171 messages a day last year, a number expected to double by 2010.

Attempts to get people to rely less on email have had mixed success. Many office workers have come to rely on instant messaging for simple communications, taking some pressure off the inbox, but IM still has a relatively small presence inside companies. Some companies have set up online "work spaces" for collaborating on documents—central locations where multiple users can chat, edit documents without emailing them back and forth, and store calendars and other shared information. But these spaces are still only lightly used.

"It's very hard to get people to use a different tool when the one they're using is comfortable and easy to use," says IDC's Mr. Levitt. "For the vast majority of users, it's foreign to them."

The newest products aim to change that by integrating a host of new functions into the familiar email window.

For instance, the latest release of Microsoft Corp.'s Exchange software for servers allows Outlook users to view documents, tasks or messages stored in Microsoft's SharePoint collaborative work space without leaving email; users can see their SharePoint to-do lists and appointments in the Outlook tasks list or calendar—and can make changes to items in SharePoint from Outlook.

Moreover, the software allows users to keep up to date with favorite Web sites through Outlook, instead of switching over to a browser. Users can set up RSS feeds—which automatically send users new content that is added to a site—that show up in an Outlook folder.

The software even promises to integrate phone calls with email, allowing users to launch calls or receive voice-mail messages within the Outlook inbox. (You must install an Internet-phone system for this feature to work. Microsoft is issuing new communication-server software that will have built-in Internet-phone technology.)

Marquette University in Milwaukee is introducing Microsoft Exchange 2007 for its 18,000 faculty, staff and student email accounts, as well as its IT department. The integration with SharePoint was a big selling point. The IT department uses SharePoint as a common online workplace to manage projects, identify who's on call and keep track of uncompleted tasks. With the new email system, technicians no longer have to log on to the SharePoint site, say, to add a name to the on-call list; they can make changes

directly from an Outlook calendar.

"It helps to aggregate all this stuff in one place," says Danny Smith, the university's senior director of IT services.

The next version of International Business Machines Corp.'s Lotus Notes, known as Notes 8, also places email at the center of even more daily activities. Scheduled for release mid-year, the software includes built-in word-processor, spreadsheet and presentation software, all of which are accessible through tabs at the top of the email window. So, for instance, you wouldn't need to launch another program if you wanted to create a graph.

Notes also links up with Lotus's instant-messaging software. If users need an immediate response to a message, they can see whether a contact is online—the person's name will appear in green in the Notes window, with a green button alongside it. Then users can launch an IM session without leaving Notes.

Notes also can be set up to include "activities," a way to organize emails, documents and appointments around a project. Notes shows a list of all activities in a separate pane, and users can drag an email straight from the inbox into the relevant project; everyone on the team will get an email notification of the change. If the user tries to send an email with a large attachment to several people, Notes will suggest putting the document into an activity instead, to reduce the strain on email resources.

Notes 8 recently began its public

beta test, but some users have been testing it since late last year. One of them, Milwaukee-based Johnson Controls Inc., which makes automotive-interior and building-control systems, has been testing Notes 8 with about 10 people in its IT department. If the trial is successful, the company expects to begin rolling the software out to all 70,000 employees with email by the fall.

Renate Tomesch, Johnson Controls' manager of global enterprise messaging, says that though the test is in its early stages, a couple of features promise to make email use less disruptive and more productive. For instance, the inbox windows will let you know whether someone is the sole recipient of an email or has been copied along with others. The feature lets busy executives devote less attention to group messages, which are often copied to many people on an "FYI" basis.

But it's IBM's promise of "activity-centric computing" that has the most appeal. "A lot of us spend a lot of time in our email and would like to organize all our information in one spot," says Ms. Tomesch.

Three-year-old Zimbra Inc., based in San Mateo, Calif., is an email newcomer that is bringing the latest Web-based technologies, such as mashups—which invisibly pull information from one application into another—to the problem of email overload. "This is a market that's just ripe for innovation," says Scott Dietzen, Zimbra's president and chief technology officer. "The dom-

The screenshot shows an email client interface. At the top, it says "Andy Pflaum" and "Grade - Zimbra meeting - Guys: Here are some of the". Below that, it says "I am arriving by flight CO 1049". The main content is a map of Seattle, WA, with a red star marking a location. The map shows streets like "North Broad" and "East Seattle". To the right of the map, there is a calendar view with dates 2, 3, 5, 6, 10, 17, 24, 3, 10. Below the calendar, it says "They want to meet at their office: 2510 Fairview Avenue East Seattle WA 98102". At the bottom, it says "Additionally, Ari placed the order for the test server. The P.O. number is GR733 792806493888."

BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME Zimbra Inc.'s "zimlet" applications let users pull outside information, such as maps, into regular email

inant solutions were designed before the Web experience took off."

With Zimbra's search engine—similar to those in the other new email programs—users can search emails by date, by size and by whether or not there's an attachment, in addition to hunting by keyword or sender. It also makes it possible to save previous searches.

But what really sets Zimbra apart are "zimlets"—miniapplications that connect Zimbra email with other software applications, such as a company's customer-relationship management software or a Web-based service, such as Yahoo Maps. For instance, nurses at Interim HealthCare Inc., a Sunrise, Fla., health-care staffing company, use zimlets to search the company's document database for information on wound management

without leaving the email program. "This makes Zimbra the main portal" for employees, says Satish Movva, Interim's vice president and chief information officer.

Another customer, ZipRealty Inc., a residential real-estate brokerage company in Emeryville, Calif., last year began using Zimbra for its more than 1,800 real-estate agents in 15 states and the District of Columbia. The company uses zimlets in a number of ways. For instance, when an agent gets an email from a prospective buyer asking to schedule a property tour for, say, next Tuesday, the agent can pass the cursor over the words "next Tuesday" in the text of the email and call up a calendar to see if the day is available. The agent can then schedule the appointment without leaving the note. ■