

IM:AGE IS EVERYTHING

Expectations of Immediacy, Productivity and the Rise of Instant Messaging



by Elizabeth L. Ivey



Does the following exchange sound familiar? “I sent an e-mail requesting the information that you require. I’m waiting for a response, but it may take a day before I hear from my contact.” And later, “That individual responded and they referred me to another person in their department. I forwarded the request to them and am now waiting.”

How about, “Hold please, I need to make a call to gain that information for you. (one minute later) Thanks for your patience, that person wasn’t in. Let me make another call. (30 seconds later) Thanks for holding. I’m going to transfer you to an individual who can answer your question now.”

Or worse, when spoken to a customer, “Can I get back to you with that information? Let me take your name and number. I need to track down some people to have your answer by tomorrow at the latest. Is that OK?”

Human interactions remain the foundation of most business relationships. Waiting a day or two for a response to a more traditional form of communication has come to be tolerable in an era of bloated e-mail inboxes, but it doesn’t do much for productivity. People want and expect timely responses to their inquiries. They will spend valuable time waiting for simple answers and readily go to a competitor if they don’t get immediate attention.

Instant messaging (IM) applications provide a real-time experience that can enhance timely communications internally, as well as externally. *Instant* is defined as occurring, acting or accomplished without loss or interval of time. IM offers an easy-to-use

forum for the quick question, clarification, special request or relevant observation. It also supports brainstorming and collaboration that can span days or the life of an entire project. As people become accustomed to the quick response time that IM applications provide, the tendency to use the same productivity tools at work increases. Studies have shown that roughly 70 percent of employees are already

using some form of IM in their workplace, sanctioned or unsanctioned. The Yankee Group estimates that 65 million people worldwide now use IM for business; it expects that number to reach 330 million worldwide by the end of 2005. Left unmanaged, a consumer-grade IM can jeopardize a corporate network and make it susceptible to a range of risks and security headaches. Before reaching to press the IT policy panic button and taking extreme measures to prevent IM use, do not ignore its potential to link knowledge seekers with internal experts. At the risk of sounding a bit Boulder (Colorado, that is), companies that embrace and exploit IM are likely to experience untold benefits, not the least of which is attracting and retaining Net-savvy employees. Capitalist theory teaches that if you can motivate a workforce currently using productivity tools to really benefit from them, the business benefits will follow.

As many industries struggle to understand the impact and opportunities of Internet protocol (IP) communication, it is important to note that IM may be the single fastest growing form of IP communication. This growing adoption rate among all members of the Internet-using population is legitimizing IM as a business tool. Much like Internet connectivity for employees in the workplace, once viewed as a license for goofing off, IM is passing the disruptive technology stage and is hitting the second stage; conducive to productivity at a relatively low cost.

Millions of messages a day travel over each of the most widely used consumer IM services; AOL Instant Messenger, MSN Messenger and Yahoo! Messenger. Enterprise IM is gaining ground as more companies address the need

for secure internal applications. IM can reduce meeting costs by connecting geographically dispersed employees for low-cost, instant interactions. Whether they are in another country or down the hall, employees can exchange information that moves projects forward, without the need for time-consuming meetings or costly conference calls. Deployments in industries ranging from financial services to entertainment to fast food, are demonstrating the benefits of real-time communications and presence awareness associated with the technology.

There is no doubt that IM has a serious image problem among mature computer users that will not be easily overcome. The original consumer-oriented technology caught on quickly with Generation Y and has since become associated with a strange new vernacular of letters, symbols and pictures. Despite the adolescent cuteness of the most popular tools, the median age of IM users has been growing steadily with its increased adoption.

I admit I was reluctant and skeptical too. But it’s my nature to try almost anything once. At first it was a little distracting, a novelty of sorts, however, it has irrefutably improved daily communications with my superior, allowed collaboration with overseas colleagues and enhanced my downtime productivity. Not only is my e-mail inbox under 30 items for the first time in years, but the long distance bills are significantly lower and I spend much less time playing phone tag with those whom I communicate with routinely. And yes, this really does lend more time to important business matters as well as personal enrichment.

As for the all-too-familiar exchanges used earlier to illustrate the inefficiency in current business communications, there is little question that IM could streamline each of those scenarios. Better communication equals greater organizational efficiency, more informed employees and improved customer response levels. Any technology that helps people more quickly share knowledge, creative ideas and answers to questions that customers regularly seek, is likely to create a competitive advantage.

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