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E-Mail Management: A Techno-Managerial Research Perspective

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E-MAIL MANAGEMENT: A TECHNO-MANAGERIAL RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

E-mail is becoming the most ubiquitous medium for communication within organizations. The reasons that have led to the popularity and wide-spread adoption of e-mail have also become the cause of issues such as e-mail overload, stress, interruptions, prolonged work hours, etc. Although the time spent on e-mail may represent as much as 25 percent to 40 percent of a knowledge worker's daily time, MIS research on this topic is relatively sparse. While there has been some research in related disciplines on the use of e-mail (e.g., Whittaker et al. 2005), more effort has been focused on spam control than on the management of real e-mail. In a recent *MIS Quarterly* editorial, Ron Weber (2004) called for more research on the proper use of e-mail by knowledge workers. For example, the concept of e-mail overload has not been clearly defined in the literature; subsequently, there is a need to develop metrics for this phenomenon. On the other hand, many knowledge workers seem to check their e-mail through PDAs even during a face-to-face meeting. This may lead to interesting dynamics within a physical meeting. In this panel, we study both technical and empirical perspectives to better understand the problem of e-mail management. The panel will focus on the use of e-mail in the workplace, the predictors and consequences of e-mail overload, and approaches and techniques to minimize the adverse effects of e-mail overload. The goal will be to share recent research by the panelists in academia and industry, and to identify mutually beneficial research opportunities for managing e-mail.

This panel session will bring together industry and academic research from various disciplines on an important problem that has so far received relatively little attention in the IS literature and will help focus on research that has high practical significance and usability. The panelists believe that e-mail management is one area where IS research can make a significant, measurable impact.

About the Panelists

Ramesh Sharda is a Regents Professor of MSIS, ConocoPhillips Chair of Management of Technology, and director of the Institute for Research in Information Systems at Oklahoma State University. Ramesh will introduce the panel members and will discuss the relevance and importance of studying this problem in an academic-industry setting. Finally, he will lead a panel/audience discussion to help develop a research agenda in this domain.

Nicolas Ducheneaut is a research scientist at Palo Alto Research Center. E-mail has become more like a "habitat" than an application: it is now the place where PC users spend much if not most of their workdays (the application is always on, and is often the focus of attention). This, and the burgeoning quantities of messages and attachments that e-mail delivers to people each day, has led users to co-opt it as a task management tool. Current e-mail clients, however, are poorly suited to this activity. Nicolas will discuss the six most important challenges of task management in e-mail and, most importantly, how the *quality* of e-mail exchanges contributes significantly more to a feeling of overload than the *quantity* of messages.

J. Leon Zhao is a Honeywell Fellow of MIS and a professor in the MIS Department at the University of Arizona. Leon will provide a workflow perspective that considers e-mail as a primitive information channel that can be made more efficient by

embedding e-mail into organizational processes. Leon has also been working in a new area of research, dubbed *organizational knowledge distribution*, which integrates knowledge relevancy analysis with workflow automation. The objective of this area is to improve the accessibility of knowledge while reducing information overload in business organizations.

Ashish Gupta is a visiting assistant professor at the Oklahoma State University, Tulsa. Ashish will start with a brief review of IS literature on e-mail. He will present findings of various research initiatives undertaken by the REMS group, which he leads. The research of the REMS group focuses on developing heuristics for determining frequency and the length of time allocated to e-mail checking by a knowledge worker.

Ron Weber is Dean of the Faculty of Information Technology at Monash University, Australia. He was the Editor-in-Chief of *MIS Quarterly* from 2002 through 2004. Ron will provide a practitioner's perspective on e-mail research, and present an integrative framework based upon the comments made by the other panelists. His editorial commentary in the September 2004 issue of *MIS Quarterly* provides the basis for developing this framework. Through his arguments, Ron will discuss the professional and personal impact of e-mail on individuals, groups, and organization. He will also address the impact of e-mail checking behavior in physical meetings.

Format of Interaction

An online discussion forum will be organized to create a dialog among the panelists and other interested parties through a web-based forum at **http://iris.okstate.edu/REMS**, the e-mail research web site of Ramesh Sharda and his research team. This interaction will permit the panelists to engage in a discussion before presenting their research at the ICIS session. The ICIS panel session will begin with the panel chair (Ramesh Sharda) introducing the panelists, followed by a presentation by each panelist giving an overview of their research (10 minutes each). The discussion (30 minutes) will include a question and answer session and highlight important areas for future work on e-mail use. The panel and the audience discussion will carve out major research themes that are worth exploring and important from an IS researcher's standpoint in this area. A session summary will be distributed which will include a list of major research topics identified by the panelists and the web forum participants, allowing the attendees to take an actionable plan home.

The panel invites participation from researchers who have interests in the areas of e-mail communication, collaboration, organizational communication, individual and organizational performance, and information overload.

References

Weber, R. "A Grim Reaper: The Curse of E-Mail," *MIS Quarterly* (28:3), September 2004, pp. iii-xiii.
Whittaker, S., Bellotti, V., and Moody, P. "Introduction to the Special Issue on Revisiting and Reinventing E-Mail," *Human-Computer Interaction* (20:1&2), 2005, pp. 1-19.