

bluekiwi

enterprise social software

Why Are Companies Moving Beyond Email?

The Evolution to Social Business and Collaboration

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A blueKiwi White Paper

Introduction

As business becomes more real-time, distributed and social - the way we electronically communicate at work is changing. Instant messaging and chat applications, voice and video conferencing, microblogging updates and activity streams are invading the territory which so far has been the bastion of email. Yet the volume and cost of corporate email continues to rise past 'overload' levels.

According to a Radicati Group¹ report published in April 2010, corporate users are estimated to receive an average of 75 emails per day in 2011 and send about 37 of them each day. At the same time, it is not uncommon these days for some users to receive more than 200 emails a day. With 18% of the emails received being unwanted messages – the same study projects that a typical 1000 user organization will spend \$3 million annually to fight spam.

Another study published in the International Journal of Internet and Enterprise Management² (IJIEM) estimates that the annual cost of business email per employee is upwards of \$8000. The study cited problems such as ambiguous and unclear messages, email overload, security and privacy issues, and email interruptions all impeding effective and efficient work practices. The survey presents other interesting facts that characterize email use in corporations –

- Almost one in five emails was cc'ed unnecessarily to staff members other than the main recipient.
- 13% of received emails were irrelevant or untargeted and a mere 41% of received emails were for informational purposes.
- Less than half of emails (46%) that required an action on the part of the recipient actually stated what the expected action was.
- 56% of employees remarked that email is used too often instead of telephone or face-to-face

With such inefficiencies of email being commonly felt, it is not surprising that many companies and management leaders are considering how to evolve their electronic communication beyond email. They are adopting next generation platforms that better meet changing business needs and reclaim some of the lost productivity associated with email.

This whitepaper looks at the new reality of business communication and collaboration and concludes that corporate email as we know it is indeed past its prime. At the least, the very nature of email usage is slowly changing - from being the mainstay of business communication to a more limited channel for notifications and updates. Read on to find out why email falls short and what new mode of corporate communication and collaboration platforms is needed today.

¹ Radicati Group Email Statistics Report, 2010

² Thomas W. Jackson, Sharman Lichtenstein. Optimising e-mail communication: the impact of seminar- and computer-based training. International Journal of Internet and Enterprise Management, 2011

What makes email inefficient?

- ▶ Ambiguous and unclear messages
- ▶ Dealing with spam and message overload
- ▶ Security and privacy issues
- ▶ Interruptions to regular work

Source: IJIEM Study

Changing Nature of Business

The root of email's success and the challenges that it faces as a communication medium today, is driven by the changing nature of business. Technology evolution has continuously transformed how business is done and the pace has only accelerated over time. Each major shift has placed new demands on corporate communication methods – and email has for the most part been able to adapt well to these changes until now.

Automation

Right through the 1970's to the 1990's, tremendous productivity gains were realized from streamlining and automating the execution of business processes and their reporting and control. This meant being able to perform routine work faster with fewer errors – whether it be in the manufacturing of products on an assembly line, or, the management of the order to cash process in an ERP system. The underlying communication methods though, remained firmly rooted to phone, fax and textual information sharing. Early forms of email found use in this environment especially for text based communication within users of a corporate network.

Why Did Email Succeed Until Now?

- ▶ It's an efficient mechanism for the distribution of information
- ▶ In the past, emphasis was more on one-to-one communication and less on social sharing or group collaboration

Information Distribution

With the Internet becoming main stream starting in the late 1990's and into the last decade, the barriers presented by time and geography shrunk dramatically. Virtually distributed teams spread across multiple offices were now able to effectively collaborate and co-work on unified projects using a rich stream of information that included images and links, over and above electronic text and documents. Email adapted well and grew exponentially in this phase, spurred on by 'webification', remote access to corporate email systems and support for multimedia attachments.

Social Collaboration

The last few years can be aptly described as the age of social business and collaboration. With over a billion users on social networking platforms – the expectations of today's information workers are forever changed. Staying connected with news and status updates from friends, family, or at work is more real-time, and un-tethered to a computer. With ever increasing information overload, communication modes today lay emphasis on messages being more 'relevant', 'networked' and 'shared'. Further, for knowledge-based organizations it is often advantageous to tap into the collective intelligence of a group than engaging in closed communication loops with a few people. Email is not as well adapted to this process and faces some fundamental challenges.

The next section looks at the challenges faced by email communication in this new business environment.

The Challenges of Email-Based Communication

As long as business communication methods remained primarily limited between one or a few known individuals, email remained a very efficient platform. Its striking growth over the last two decades to becoming the mainstay of electronic communication bears that out. However with the changing nature of business, a number of fundamental challenges have arisen.

Push vs. Pull Communication

Email is by nature a 'push' mode of communication. When you send out an email it almost certainly arrives at the receiver's Inbox (unless caught in a Spam filter). Of course filtering and prioritization settings can help 'manage' the flow of email somewhat, but they do not solve the core issue. 'Managing' (deciding what to read, delete and prioritize) every email that is sent is time consuming. This is apart from the time spent in actually reading or replying to an email and the 'interrupt' time needed to focus back on the work at hand. The considerable negative effect on corporate productivity is easily apparent – since this cycle is repeated nearly every time we get a new email.

In contrast, social business today is evolving a 'pull' mode of communication. Instead of all messages being pushed to your Inbox, you would benefit from relevant messages being pulled depending on your interest, information access privileges and current work projects. For example, you may like to stay updated on all messages from a particular co-worker on an important project, but may not be interested in other communication from the same person. There is no practical way to filter this in email without the risk of losing out on important and actionable items – since you receive all the email that this co-worker sends you.

Fragmentation vs. Single Consolidated View

All of us are familiar with discussions carried out in long email chains. The very fact that there were multiple replies meant that the subject was relevant or important. However, digging through an email chain to figure out who said what, finding and collating separate replies, and managing multiple versions of documents shared as attachments are all time-consuming and productivity sapping. Moreover, gaps in context that result from private conversation streams that evolve in separately forked replies - cause confusion and result in incorrect decision making. Unfortunately, without a single consolidated view of a email chain this scenario is played out daily in most organizations.

Key Challenges to Email Communication

- ▶ Push communication that requires 'management' of every incoming email
- ▶ Fragmented replies that need extra effort to collate and synthesize
- ▶ Emphasis on communication and not collaboration
- ▶ Static contact directory structure that has no social knowledge
- ▶ Closed communication loops that create information silos
- ▶ Unstructured communication that does not immediately aid decision making

Individual Communication vs. Group Collaboration

While email has been effective as a communication medium primarily in one-to-one conversations, it has poor characteristics for supporting group collaboration. Organizations have attempted to address this through the creation of fixed group email id's ensuring that all communication to the common id reaches its constituent members.

This is entirely insufficient for multiple reasons. First, the fragmentation issues described above are amplified in a group setting. Second, in any dynamic work environment group memberships may need to change with each new project – which is difficult to manage with email systems. Third, group discussions may need to be archived for audit, knowledge capture and re-use and be easily searchable at any later time. However, the way each individual group member filters and organizes their email impacts greatly their version of the archived history (for example, members may be deleting emails to stay under maximum allowed mailbox size). Email archiving solutions may help somewhat in this process, but the overall lack of context in email fragments of an overall group conversation make searching and information retrieval almost impossible.

Contact vs. Expertise Directories

With distributed organizations, it is also increasingly harder for teams to know whom to reach out to for inputs on a particular discussion. Contact directories in email systems provide little to no detail on the expertise of employees so that their help can be solicited on projects of interest. Finding the right person to address your email may depend solely on reaching out to people that you or your peers already know (aka your immediate social graph). The process of 'discovery' of a relevant expert in another part of your company may take considerable time and effort, with many phone and email conversations and consequently is a rare occurrence.

Closed vs. Open

Email exchanges constantly create silos of information and discussion that are tied to the individual recipient. Who receives particular information via email is entirely dependent on the sender. So any advertent or inadvertent decision on the sender's part to include/exclude certain recipient's can affect business outcome. Team members who may have an input into that discussion, or may be affected could easily be left out of the loop. While private messaging is required for sensitive discussions, the de-facto "closed-loop" communication method of email prevents the best expertise and knowledge in an organization to be leveraged.

This closed loop nature of email also make it hostage to delays in replies that slow down business activity. After all, email depends on the specific receiving party being available to check their email and reply to it as their work schedule permits.

Short Subjects vs. Lengthy Content

While brevity is welcome, short email subjects can be notoriously misleading. With the limited space allowed – making a decision for prioritization often requires opening and scanning an email to find out if it's relevant and apply a prioritization action. By then it's already too late and time has been wasted. Paradoxically, while the email subject might be too short or unclear, the content of an email can be too long and cluttered. Both of these aspects only add to the wasteful time investment and inefficiency of dealing with email.

Narrative vs. Structured Feedback

Imagine asking your team members for an opinion on a topic and receiving multiple layers of replies and comments. Collating who said what and drawing a conclusion of their opinion requires a good amount of time and mental processing. Email offers no way to move from a narrative form to a structured feedback process. In the latter, up or down 'votes' would be automatically calculated and made visible with their contextual opinions for faster decision making.

Email Id vs. Social Profile based Security

While email transmission and storage has become more secure with the use of encryption techniques, hackers can still impersonate a sender's email address or start a 'phishing' conversation. Without knowing the social context of the sender, each email stands on its merit of the displayed sender name only. Viruses and malicious users regularly attack this vulnerability and are able to prompt inadvertent sharing of confidential business information or even cause severe business disruption.

What's Beyond Email: Enterprise Social Software

The use of email in today's social and collaborative organizations is fraught with difficulty. Email is creating a serious drag on individual and team productivity impacting entire organizations - with poor support for the business needs of co-creation, collaboration and co-sourcing.

No doubt corporate organizations are frustrated with using email as their primary communication and collaboration system. While email is advantageous from the point of ubiquity (almost everybody in the company has an email id) – business needs call for a different type of communications and social collaboration platform to claim new productivity gains at the individual and more importantly at the group or community level.

Enterprise Social Software (ESS), as these next generation platforms are called, are built from the ground up to manage high volumes of collaborative engagement and conversation among distributed teams and project groups. They build on the conceptual ideas of the popular social networking platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn – but with a host of enterprise-ready features to make them secure, private, collaborative and business integration-friendly.

ESS platforms offer not only the capability to send messages and share documents like in email, but also include expanded features to participate, filter and engage in other kinds of interactions like document co-creation; idea, task and project-based collaboration; and integration into existing business systems and workflows.

What is Enterprise Social Software?

"...a system of web-based technologies that provide rapid and agile collaboration, information sharing, emergence and integration capabilities in the extended enterprise"

Source: Wikipedia

Key Characteristics of an ESS Platform

This table illustrates the key characteristics of a primary enterprise collaboration and communication platform in the social business environment.

Characteristics of an ESS Platform	Description and Benefits
Pull based Relevance and Prioritization	With the extent of information overload, end users need to control what appears in their activity stream. ESS systems enable end users to select what they want to see based on their assigned role, privileges and group memberships. Users can also explicitly 'follow' projects, discussions, activities and people. ESS systems also have the smarts to suggest other relevant people, documents and conversations that the user may be interested in - based on the history of their interactions and the 'social graph' of members they engage with.
Single Page View without any Fragmentation	Each group conversation in an ESS system provides a single page view of all threaded conversations along with all shared documents, activities and files. This eliminates the complex task of finding, collating and understanding fragmented conversations and previously shared attachments.
Inherent Support for Group Collaboration	ESS platforms are built from the ground up to facilitate and promote open collaboration and sharing within a group. Microblogging, activity streams, wikis, document/file uploads, announcements, shared calendars, event set-up, idea and task management and a host of other capabilities provide powerful support for collaboration that is not possible with email.
Easy Access to Group Participation	Whereas email group ids merely represent a collection of individuals, communities and groups on an ESS platform have clearly defined objectives and areas of co-working and collaboration. This provides an effective way to materialize in digital form distributed, cross-departmental groups that have no physical existence. Employees can easily seek or create membership as needed – raising participation levels, creating a better sense of belonging, and leveraging the talents of the organization.
Private Communication between Individuals	Just like in email, ESS platforms also support one-to-one or one-to-many private communication outside a group context. This is necessary when specific information is needed to be shared with a limited number of participants. Typically though, most conversations are openly shared with the group to leverage organizational resources in the best manner possible.

Continued - Key Characteristics of an ESS Platform

Characteristics of an ESS Platform	Description and Benefits
Comprehensive Search Capability across Multiple Dimensions	Since ESS platforms capture and retain organizational knowledge in its entirety, they offer powerful search features for information retrieval at any later time. For example, archived discussions and files can be searched by contributor, commenter, timeline, social tags, group, keyword phrases and many other dimensions.
Rich Enterprise Directories and Expert Discovery	A primary function of ESS platforms is the ability to capture detailed personal and professional expertise and accumulated experience of all members. Since this data is also searchable, project teams can easily locate organizational experts who can add value to their initiatives. ESS allows members to leverage the entire organizational network for a common purpose instead of having to depend only on their immediate social graph.
Private, Secure Information Exchange with Internal or External Stakeholders	Unlike an email address that says little about the sender and can be easily breached, the rich social context of an individual's profile and social graph facilitates private, secure and meaningful communication. Co-workers can always send messages to you as can any community member. New external contacts who wish to be in touch can reach out through consumer-centric social tools and can be incorporated into external groups – creating a secure, collaborative space for future discussions without any spam or unwanted messages.
Shorter, Purposeful Communication	ESS platforms support the new norms of social communication via shorter and purposeful microblogging and status updates that provide a richer information context. This makes it much easier to assess relevancy and 'manage' activity streams without being restricted by a short subject line as in email.
Seamless Extension to External Communities	Organizations frequently need to engage with external partners, customers and consultants to develop and share ideas or perform work. ESS platforms provide the capability for internal group members to host and manage external communities while maintaining privacy and control over what is shared.
Business Process Integration	ESS platforms offer structured API's so that they can be easily integrated into other business applications. For example, ESS platforms can integrate with Document Management Systems to maintain a single 'shared' copy of a working document along with all of the contextual conversations associated with it.

Benefits of ESS Platforms

With their advanced support for engagement and interaction over and above business communication, ESS systems make it easy to foster an open and collaborative organization where projects, ideas and events are defined, discussed and get done. Key benefits of ESS platforms include the following -

- Boosting internal productivity gains through enhanced collaboration and exchange
- Higher responsiveness and agility in business response
- Fully uncovering and leveraging of internal talent
- Centralized and automated knowledge capture from regular business interactions
- Powerful search and retrieve capability for knowledge re-use
- Effective management of tasks and projects across distributed groups
- Co-creation and development of new documents and ideas
- Structured survey and feedback mechanisms that aid faster decision making

Case Study: Lyonnaise des Eaux – Suez Environnement

Background

A subsidiary of SUEZ ENVIRONNEMENT, Lyonnaise des Eaux provides water and sanitation services throughout France. The company supplies drinking water to 12 million customers, treats wastewater for over 9 million people, and is a committed player in sustainable development. As a large company with more than 8,000 employees with many of them distributed across multiple sites, Lyonnaise des Eaux faced a number of issues with email being their primary communication platform:

- Overflowing inboxes that took a lot of time and effort to sort through
- Explosive growth in the number of files exchanged
- A flood of completely unproductive 'reply to all' messages

Loss of time and information when coordinating between various experts that needed to work together

Solution

Lyonnais Des Eaux realized the limitations of email and planned a shift to a more comprehensive social collaboration platform, choosing blueKiwi as their solution. Development of this social network approach began in 2008, by initially identifying the communities that already interacted using email. These communities were then recreated in blueKiwi so that they were empowered to collaborate, share and find information more easily. With renewed focus on people, skills and ideas, blueKiwi helped generate and capture collective intelligence for organizational use.

Email has now become a transitional tool for Lyonnaise des Eaux, a bridge towards the social network, with messages that are temporary and mostly disposable. For example, users are alerted to the arrival of a new message in a community via their email. With more than 50 communities today, there is more information on the social network and contextual value shared between individuals than ever.

Conclusion: The Future of Corporate Email

Given its ubiquity and status as the primary method of business communication, email will not go away soon. However, the nature of email communication is bound to change and already has in organizations that have adopted an enterprise social software solution.

Our customer interactions indicate that email will continue to be used for notifications and alerting for the foreseeable future. This makes sense since every employee has access to email and the behavior to check and respond to email is well established. However, with the increasing deployment of social applications in the enterprise, email will continue to lose ground as the 'conversation and collaboration' platform. Since typical business applications are also aiming to become more social they are further pushing the envelope to integrate ESS capabilities into their workflow.

In our view, corporate email has started its decline and business communication will undergo a gradual shift to a new paradigm of social collaboration. The promise of faster and more relevant communication, better utilization of corporate talent, and accelerated group collaboration and innovation using ESS is a real promise that is hard to ignore.

blueKiwi

transforming conversations into business actions.

About blueKiwi Software

blueKiwi is the innovation leader in Enterprise Social Software. Our solutions enable hundreds of enterprises worldwide to engage and interact with their internal and external social networks in multiple business domains. Built from the ground up as a SaaS platform, blueKiwi is powering social business in many Global 2000 companies. As a testament to its pioneering background and leadership, Gartner has consistently recognized blueKiwi as a visionary company since 2007.



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