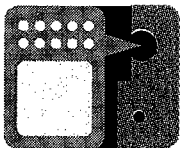


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Talking Tech / By Lee Gomes

Email Pioneer's Important Message: Spam, Like Roaches, Can Be Curbed



One of the technology world's 25th anniversaries being observed this year—in addition to the launch of International Business Machines Corp.'s personal computer—belongs to a less well-known set of initials: SMTP. Simple Mail Transfer Protocol is the behind-the-scenes post office that delivers mail over the Internet.

While a student at the University of California, Berkeley, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Eric Allman helped develop SMTP; he now is chief science officer of Sendmail Inc., which sells products based on the SMTP system. Mr. Allman talked about the altogether unexpected way email has evolved over the last few decades.

Did you invent email?

No, that actually came in 1971, with a guy named Ray Tomlinson. But that was before the Internet existed. Twenty-five years ago is SMTP, which is the protocol used to carry Internet mail around.

Email was an instant success. Which is interesting, because it hadn't been thought about when they designed the ARPAnet, the Internet's predecessor. It was an afterthought. But it caught on very quickly for collaboration among researchers. I remember that it used to be thrilling when that little 'bing' went off on the computer, which meant you had mail. It was 'Oh, cool.' But it rapidly got uncool when it was binging all the time.

Some people are switching off email because it is too interrupting. There are people now who have other people at work who read their email for them. It's

These days, a lot of people think email is more of a curse than a blessing; even without spam, there are just so many of them.

starting to become more common. I don't think it's inherently email's problem; it would happen with anything where we had so much information flowing in at once.

Knowing what we know now, would you have designed email protocols differently—say to make it harder to send spam?

Almost certainly—for every Internet protocol we have. Back then, the Internet was all about sharing resources. It was a collegial atmosphere. And there weren't commercial transactions.

When I first did my work, the existing email system wasn't very reliable, and mail got lost all the time. But now, we've lost reliability again. Now it's entirely possible that somebody will send me something completely legitimate, and it will get caught by my spam filter and end up tucked away in quarantine somewhere.

When will we get rid of spam?

We will never get rid of spam. That's the bad news. But the good news is that, like cockroaches, we can get spam to the point where we can coexist with it and keep it down to an acceptable number.

What can we do about email overload?

One of the things we're going to need is a new generation of tools to help us with our mailboxes. In the old days, an executive would have a secretary that would read all of his mail, so only the important stuff would get through. We need something similar today. I think there can be a generation of tools that learn what I consider important and present it to me. But I am talking in two years from now. This is a very hard problem, and it will not happen overnight.