

Instant Messaging in the Workplace

BY JEFF HOFFMAN, *Student Member, Twin Cities Chapter*



Has e-mail become the new snail mail? Although it was once the fastest, most efficient way to communicate, many now consider e-mail to be too slow. Instant messaging is taking over as the new darling of business communication. It's easy to see why. An instant message, or IM, allows users to exchange information more quickly than e-mail does. In a matter of seconds, a note appears on the recipient's computer screen in a small pop-up window. IM software also enables geographically dispersed work groups to work together more efficiently. Some corporate versions even allow multiple users in different locations to collaborate on the same document simultaneously.

As a result, increasing numbers of businesses are turning to IM. As more and more companies take advantage of this tool, some experts believe that instant messaging will replace e-mail in the workplace within four to five years. IMs are no longer limited to exchanges of teen gossip or driving directions. They now carry programming specifications and user requirements. Kevin Vandenberg, a director at the software develop-

Dave Ember/Laughing Stock

ment firm Navitaire, says, “We work with people in Ireland, the Philippines, and various locations around the U.S. every day. I don’t know how we’d get anything done without instant messaging.”

In many companies today, employees are simply downloading the same version of the free software that is designed for home use. As a result, corporate standards regarding its usage don’t exist. In response, many software companies are adapting their existing instant messaging products for business use. They recognize the limitations of the current software packages for corporate users—limitations such as a lack of security, archiving, and abuse-monitoring capabilities. Many of the key players in the industry are now creating enterprise versions of their instant messaging software that will address these issues. They hope to compete with and improve upon the few enterprise instant messaging software packages in today’s marketplace.

In the meantime, many employees are simply downloading the same version of the free software that is designed for home use. As a result, corporate standards regarding its usage don’t exist. For technical communicators especially, what is touted as a time-saving tool for fast-paced work groups could prove to be their downfall if they don’t use it wisely. As more companies install instant messaging software in the workplace, vital information may be falling through the cracks because it isn’t retained. Also, the benefit of convenience may be outweighed by loss of human contact.

Whether you use a downloaded home version of instant messaging or one of the existing business versions, there are six major points to keep in mind.

1 Use the right medium for the message. Instant messages are great for getting brief questions answered quickly. Information that you would otherwise have to get by walking to someone’s desk can now be found in a matter of seconds. And your contact can be in another location. But once an instant message system is incorporated into the workplace, it’s easy to rely on it exclusively and ignore other modes of communication. There are still many times when an e-mail or

phone call is more appropriate than an IM. Questions that require research or lengthy responses should be asked through e-mail or over the phone. Also, because of the brevity and immediacy of an IM, there’s a greater risk of its being misinterpreted. It’s easy to read unintended meaning into an IM. A phone call can eliminate that confusion and is much more personal. Sensitive subjects should always be discussed in person.

2 Record pertinent information. Sometimes a conversation through instant messaging can become lengthy. A seemingly “simple” question to a co-worker or an off-site client may turn out to be complicated. You may discover vital information or critical issues. If the software you’re using doesn’t allow for saving or archiving messages, be sure to copy the text of those critical messages into a word-processing tool. That way, the information can be saved and shared. This could take time, though: Heavy editing may be necessary. Because of the nature of instant messaging, grammar and spelling are virtually ignored. But it’s worth the effort to have the information documented.

3 Follow up by e-mail. Sometimes, an IM exchange between two people in a work group may lead to decisions that affect the rest of the team. In this situation, it’s critical to capture the conversation and decision-making rationale so it can be shared with the rest of the workgroup. After a decision has been reached, send an e-mail summarizing the conversation to all concerned parties. You may not need to share all of the information from the conversation, but be sure to recap the key points that are pertinent to the work group. Even if you don’t need to share information with the team, it’s still a good idea to follow up an IM conversation with e-mail. A simple confirmation assures you that nothing has been misunderstood.

4 Choose a leader. Some instant messaging software allows for multiple people in different locations to work on one document at the same time. This feature can reduce the time it takes to distribute a document and coordinate changes to it.

When using this option, however, it’s important to designate a leader in the group who will actually make all of the changes discussed. This helps to ensure that everyone’s edits are accurately entered and accounted for. It also helps to designate one person as a scribe to record the editorial decisions. Frequently, others will need to know the reasons for the changes, so it’s good to have documentation of the decision-making process.

5 Turn it off. It’s easy to get distracted by a continuous flow of IM pop-ups. Don’t be afraid to log out of the tool to avoid interruptions. Unlike e-mail or a phone call, instant messaging allows users to see who is active on their computers at any given time. When you log on, the tool automatically shows the other people in your work group that you are logged on and active. If your status shows as active, people can send you a message. But just because you can be available at all times doesn’t mean you have to be. Many IM systems have the option of manually changing your status to one of several categories such as “busy,” “on the phone,” or “away.” While multitasking can be great, there are times when you need to give the matter at hand your undivided attention.

6 Limit personal use. Don’t let work conversations turn into personal chats. It’s unprofessional. An occasional note about lunch plans isn’t out of line. But if a co-worker’s messages become personal, politely end the conversation. It won’t be long before companies begin to monitor personal use of instant messaging, so don’t start any bad habits.

In the world of technical communication, speed may not be everything. Accuracy is equally important, and that may be difficult to achieve in a flurry of IMs. But most workers love to use instant messaging, and it’s not going away. High-level executives are embracing it as a way to improve their bottom line, and *IMing* has become an action verb in the language of business communication. As with any new tool, keeping in mind the ultimate goal—effective information exchange—will help keep you on track. **1**