

# If Tim Fry Has His Way, He'll Eradicate Email for Good

Tim Fry and others argue that email is slow, inefficient and so 1995

Tim Fry is not your typical radical. He's upper management, works in public relations and has assistants take care of things like scheduling phone calls.

Yet, Fry is spearheading a workplace revolution—to get rid of email.

Experts weigh in on ways to give the boot to email, the increasingly inefficient means of office communications.

The Weber Shandwick executive vice president and general manager spent the past year preparing to wean the global public relations firm's 3,000 employees off their current email system. The conversion started April 23. That's when the firm switched the bulk of its interoffice communications to an internal social network that's equal parts Facebook, work group collaboration software and employee bulletin board.

His goal: to dramatically reduce how much email employees send and receive, if not eliminate email altogether by this time next year.

Weber Shandwick isn't the only company saying no to email—no to the daily deluge, to the ineffectiveness for group projects, and to what over the course of two decades has devolved from one of the fastest modes of business communication to one of the slowest.

Other companies—large and small—are taking steps to curb employees' email use. They're replacing it with social media-style online collaboration tools, SMS (text) messages, group texts and videoconferencing. "Email is quickly going the way of the fax," says Robin Richard, CEO of TweetMyJobs.com, a Twitter-based job listing service.

In some cases, companies are acting to curb responsibility they may have to pay employees overtime for being on call 24/7. Volkswagen in Germany late in 2011 turned off its email server during union employees' off-hours after workers complained the lines between their work and home life were blurring. In Brazil, a new law says employees who check their smartphones after hours are entitled to extra pay, according to this CNN report.

In other cases, companies are playing catch-up with younger workers who've already abandoned email for Facebook, Twitter and texting. For millennial workers who grew up online, email is "like writing a formal business letter," says Chris DiFonzo, CEO of OpenDesk Inc., an online marketplace for co-working spaces. "If I want to change an appointment with someone younger, I send them a text and they reply immediately. You have to roll with it."

## **The Internet's Original 'Killer App'**

It wasn't that long ago that email was the Internet's "killer app," revolutionizing the workplace by moving routine business communications from paper and faxes to bits and bytes that could be instantly transported to any computer connected to the global network.

Email is still easier to archive and search than instant messages and texts, another reason it remains an office staple. The number of worldwide email accounts is expected to grow 6 percent annually through 2016 to 4.3 billion by 2016, according to Radicati Group Inc., the Internet technology researcher.

For Microsoft Corp., that growth is one reason sales of multiyear licenses for Office 2010, which includes the ever-popular Outlook email program, increased 13 percent in its most recent quarter, even though it has been two years since the program's initial release.

But email isn't the powerhouse it once was. For all its speed and possible efficiencies, it's widely misused, prone to endless message threads and useless copies that kill employees' productivity and waste their time. Some are declaring email bankruptcy, wiping out everything in their inboxes and starting from scratch. That's not a realistic option for most businesses—and could get them in trouble if they're in industries that are required to save electronic communications with clients.

After two decades of growth, there's evidence that email use is slowing down. In the United States, the total number of email users is projected to continue rising through at least the next three years, but the rate of that growth is predicted to drop from 3.4 percent in 2010 to 2.2 percent in 2015, according to eMarketer, the Internet research firm. During the same period, the ratio of email users to total Internet users is also expected to decline, from 88.9 percent in 2010 to 87.9 percent in 2015, according to eMarketer.

The rise of consumer-based social networks helped precipitate the change, as have Facebook-type collaboration networks such as Chatter, Jive, Rypple and Yammer that let employees share status updates and documents without veering into the Internet's public channels. Over the next five years, the total number of active worldwide social networking accounts is expected to top 4.3 billion by 2016, up from 2.7 billion this year, according to Radicati Group. Just this week, Yammer CEO David Sacks told tech industry magazine *InfoWorld*: "Eventually, not having a social network in your business will be like not having a phone system or not having email."

## **Moving to a New Platform for Workplace Communications**

Some attempts to limit email haven't gone as planned. One client of Christina Randle, a workplace productivity expert with the Effectiveness Edge in Austin, tried remedying employees' email overload by banning staff from sending messages on Fridays. It backfired. Employees just stored outbound messages and sent them all Monday morning. "Instead of getting 100 messages on Friday, [people] got 200 in their inbox on Monday morning," she says.

Weber Shandwick opted to go in a different direction. In 2011, Fry organized a team from human resources, information technology, communications and other departments to study the issue. Then he sent requests for proposals to vendors of workplace collaboration tools. He selected Socialtext, which in the past five years has built social media-style internal communications networks for 6,500 customers, among them, Elsevier, Hanover Insurance Group, Isobar and the Motley Fool.

Weber Shandwick built a custom system on Socialtext's platform that lets employees do things like post status updates and share video and other large graphics files. By the time it launches, the MyWeberShandwick internal communications network will include a mobile app that employees can use from their iPhones and Android smartphones.

"Yes it will reduce email volumes, but more fundamentally it will allow us to more quickly deliver more of our services to clients. I think the more fundamental benefit is doing better work. A manifestation of that is happier employees and fewer emails," Fry says.

"As one of the employees who'll benefit from this, less email will be a nice thing," says Matt Marcus, a Weber Shandwick employee.

Fry won't know how successful his initiative will be with other employees until 2013. Other Socialtext clients already have achieved noticeable results. Hanover, for example, reduced employees' email use by 90 percent and voice mail use by 95 percent after switching to the collaboration platform, according to Socialtext CEO Eugene Lee.

Some companies use decidedly old-school alternatives to email—with positive results. Applied Predictive Technologies Inc., for example, competes against companies such as Facebook Inc., Google Inc. and McKinsey & Co. for the best and the brightest entry-level software developers and business managers graduating from Harvard University, Stanford University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology and other top schools. Instead of sending out blind emails to college campuses, Applied Predictive's recruiting team sponsors hack-a-thons and dozens of other on-campus events each year to get to know students, then follows up by postcard or phone. "I'm not suggesting that we never email people," says Cathy Baker, Applied Predictive's senior vice president of marketing and administration. "But we find people do get excited about what we do. That pays dividends for us, and it's worth the effort we make."

It seems the low-tech, high-touch communication is effective. The company has a 70 percent acceptance rate, with 50 graduates of the class of 2011 accepting job offers, including 14 of 15 students who went through its 10-week summer internship program. Says Baker: "To have that kind of success is terrific, and a sign that what we do works."