A Solution Looking for a Problem

In any decision-analysis process, there is an often-overlooked option: to do nothing. Committees spend so much time looking for the perfect solution or set of alternatives for a problem that they often lose sight of the obvious. For instance, in the case of providing e-mail services for a college or university, perhaps providing nothing is actually the best option.

Fifteen years ago, building campus e-mail systems made sense; however, these systems are now slow and have limited functionality in comparison with commercial products. There are enough e-mail providers today that higher education institutions cannot even compete. Since developing and managing e-mail services is not a core mission of the institution, why do colleges and universities spend so much time, money, and energy on developing and scaling systems or on choosing among outsourcing options? Doing nothing and using existing, rapidly evolving national or international tools might instead be the best solution.

Simple Solution

With the glut of consumer offerings, unlimited storage capabilities, expanded limits on the size of attachments, and the low cost of e-mail services (mostly free) to consumers, the simple solution is to let the user choose his or her e-mail provider. But colleges and universities must have policies in place that keep the institution informed of the user’s address—any resulting consequences of outdated addresses are the responsibility of the user. Small changes in an identity management system would allow users to maintain their e-mail addresses in a user profile. Current e-mail addresses would be obtained from a source provided by the users.

Does it matter that the college or university is not the e-mail provider? Multiple carriers and phone numbers have not hindered institutions’ ability to text students in emergencies. The same is true for e-mail.

Further Analysis

In a recent ECAR study of 27,846 freshmen and seniors from 103 institutions, about 83 percent of the students reported that a campus e-mail account was their preferred choice of communication. This response was higher among 18- and 19-year-olds (88%) and lower for students 40 and older (69%). Ninety percent of the students from Kansas State University (KSU) provided a similar response. Would the responses be the same if not forced by current institutional policies? A follow-up question needs to be, How many of the respondents reported yes while still forwarding “official” e-mail to another provider? Also, how would the ever-increasing population of distance students respond?

Close to 50 percent of the national survey respondents indicated that they participate daily in online social networks (Facebook, MySpace.com), a number that is higher for 18- and 19-year-olds (69%) and lower for the over-30 respondents (4%). At KSU, 65 percent of those surveyed reported daily use of social networks. Though perhaps not ideal or not the channel that campus officials would prefer, these social communities, which offer services outside of the institutional system, are being used by students for communication. Along with Microsoft’s acquisition of a piece of the social networking pie, innovative institutions also are beginning to embrace social networking as a communication channel.

Implications

Initial reaction to the idea of not building e-mail for employees and students involves concerns over privacy, security, integrity, and availability. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act, the Electronic Communications Privacy Act, Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, and other legislation must be adhered to. Protected data cannot leave the organization via web-based communications. Procedures for notifying users of the availability of data on secure sites accessible through a portal resolve some privacy and security problems, and policies protecting the transmission of data via e-mail already exist in many institutions. Compliance with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act legislation will be difficult to implement and best left to those who have the resources to continually improve e-mail and provide access for all.

For high-security institutions, it may be that private e-mail is required. Systems that support encrypted e-mail provide confidentiality, yet this must be end-to-end encryption. Users need to understand that the message and the transmission process must be encrypted and can be determined through vendor specifications.

Integrity of e-mail involves mail that is not wanted or not accurate. E-mail ven-
dors do a good job of screening, or allowing the user to screen, e-mail. Availability of e-mail from the large commercial vendors is a given with multiple backup systems.

Users of e-mail services remain the first line of defense. When campuses support this non-option, education about legal issues, ramifications of misuse, and e-mail etiquette will be critical. In some ways, not providing an e-mail service makes security easier. Handling subpoenas will be a snap. An institution cannot hand over a device or e-mails when these do not reside on the campus system. Further discussion must occur among college and university attorneys about who owns the e-mail, whether it can be legally retrieved from a third-party vendor or the e-mail provider of choice, and more.

Higher education institutions will need to change their policies regarding official communication. Instead of saying that “@XYZuniversity.edu” is the official campus communication channel, institutions can simply say that e-mail is an official campus communication channel. Face it: students and faculty aren’t adhering to this policy now. In these distributed and centralized environments, constituents are dismissing this policy by forwarding their campus e-mail to hundreds of different e-mail providers. Another argument may be that institutions cannot guarantee delivery of a system outside their control; however, they cannot guarantee e-mail delivery inside their control now.

In Small Is the New Big (2006), Seth Godin argues that we need to think small in terms of what the college or university provides and big in terms of the masses reached, the savings realized, and the energy saved. Dare we mention that this non-option might be the greenest option? If higher education institutions continue down the current path, they will spend millions to fight a battle when students already made a decision on an e-mail provider before admission to an institution—more than likely, at a very young age.

Even if colleges and universities choose to outsource e-mail services so that everyone continues to have the “@XYZuniversity.edu” address, there is no guarantee that the users will choose that option. “E-mail is for old people”: campus leaders need to rethink how to reach an information-infused, digital-savy student with faster, shorter, more in-touch e-channels.4 Try texting and e-mailing a sample of college students simultaneously, and chart the speed of the response. Granted, college and university leaders also need to rethink how to connect with the student population, but isn’t it flawed to think that affiliation and the feeling of being part of the campus culture occur with an e-mail address? Perhaps more important than the e-mail address is the message that is sent to maintain connectedness and to help recipients feel like a part of the tradition and culture that make each institution unique.

Let those who do e-mail best deliver these services. Vendors continuously improve their e-mail products and services. Colleges and universities can spend their collective talent by working with vendors to develop requirements for the next generation of communication tools and then by sending graduates to help build those systems.

We hope others will chime in and rip our logic apart. “Thin slicing,” as Malcolm Gladwell describes in Blink (2005), could help all of us reach the best solution. Current thinking needs to focus on such variables as considering this approach for all e-mail accounts versus only for students’ accounts, determining the thresholds at which outsourcing versus building/maintaining in-house systems makes sense, evaluating the collaborative tools bundled with outsourced products, and examining whether we are too focused on a tool or service and are thus missing the broader picture of information management.

Colleges and universities are stuck in a time warp because they have not embraced the availability of quality commercial products. To paraphrase Eugene Spafford,6 are we retrofitting tools at hand instead of rethinking the problem to be solved? Change happens. E-mail is no longer a core service; it is now a solution looking for a problem.

Notes