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Say goodbye to snail email

Instant messaging will be more popular in the office: survey

By Derek Abma, Postmedia News September 28, 2011

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In the 1990s letters and memos transitioned to email. A new survey predicts real-time software's turn is next.

Photograph by: Mark Wilson, Getty Images, Postmedia News

"Real time" communications tools will overtake email in the workplace in the coming years, according to nearly half of Canadian technology chiefs who participated in a recent survey on the subject.

IT staffing firm Robert Half Technology said 48% of the chief information officers in this poll said technology, such as instant messaging, and collaborative work applications, such as SharePoint and Yammer, will become more popular than email in office settings within five years.

"At the end of the day, it comes down to speed, which equals productivity," Chris Brady, division director for Robert Half Technology, said.

The staffing company said quickness, convenience and sociability are among the benefits of real-time communications tools.

Despite the growing popularity of quicker types of communication, Mr. Brady said email will continue to be an important tool, particularly for longer correspondence and that which involves just two people.

Besides the 48% who said real-time applications will be more widely used than email in five years, 38% said it would be equal to email in that time. Seven per cent said email would remain the dominant technological form of communication, while another 7% didn't know or didn't answer.

Alan K'necht, a Toronto-based business consultant specializing in technology trends, said instant messaging is already taking over email at smaller technology firms, which tend to be at the leading edge of what eventually happens in the mainstream.

He added that people in their 30s and younger tend to prefer text messages to email because it's quicker and less formal.

"They just say email takes too long," he said. "If they send an email to a person, the person has to open up the email, the person has to read the email then they post a response, it goes back to their inbox, they have to open it in their inbox.

"[Young workers] are using more and more text messaging and instant messaging where it just pops up in front of them."

Instant-messaging tools have been around since the Internet became widely used in the mid-1990s, but email emerged as the more dominant form of correspondence.

Mr. Brady said instant messaging technology in the past was not as reliable as email. And while email in the past decade or so has not changed much, he said instant communications has evolved in many ways, such as being able to accommodate multiple participants at once and allowing for file sharing.

In the 1990s, Mr. K'necht said, email was an easier transition from traditional methods of business communications, such as letters and memos. But for younger people who have grown up with the Internet, quicker and less formal forms of communication are the way to go, he added.

"I'm personally not a fan of [instant messaging] because I find it intrusive," said Mr. K'necht, who is almost 50. "When I talk to people in their 30s, they say, 'What do you mean it's intrusive? Intrusive is I have to go look at the email.' "

The Robert Half survey of more than 270 chief information officers from companies in Canada with 100 or more employees, was conducted in March and April. Its results accurately represent this category of professionals across the country within 4.8 percentage points, 19 times out of 20, the IT staffing company said.

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