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# Could electronic mail undermine conventional post? - archive, 1983

**1 December 1983:** Electronic mail tends to be informal in style encouraging people to send brazen messages but even if you are abroad, work can follow you wherever you are



📷 Tandy portable computer and acoustic couplers, circa 1983. Photograph: Robin Christian/The Guardian

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*David Allen*

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**A** colleague and I were in different parts of the United States recently and were due to meet at an international airport. I

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ease with which someone can now contact his office from a telephone box anywhere, that companies can contact each other by electronic means and that this country's million or so micro owners also have the opportunity - if not yet the inclination - to join in the fun, thanks to new public services, like British Telecom Gold or Prestel's Micronet.

### **Informal in style**

But is electronic mail more than an electronic solution in search of a problem. Apart from the fact that it is the only system where you pay to receive "mail" from someone else, it has some intriguing advantages - and disadvantages - in what the jargon would call "asynchronous communication."

It works like this. Hook your micro computer up to the telephone with a suitable form of "acoustic coupler" - a device with rubber cups which fit over the earpiece and mouthpiece. Run the appropriate piece of software to turn your computer into a "dumb terminal" and dial a local telephone number. Your machine can now act as a "terminal" to a large computer somewhere in the BT web. Communication is by rapidly changing tones received and transmitted via the coupler.

If you've got an account and know the incantations and passwords (computing is a bit like a magic circle at present), you can then "enter" your mailbox. Once in, you can find out if people have left mail messages for you, send messages yourself, file things away (again, on the central computer), and even discover whether messages you have sent have been read by those you've sent them to.

Although it's easy to play on the system and use it for rather trivial purposes, electronic mail really comes into its own with long distance communication when letters would take some time to arrive, when you and your contact are frequently out of the office, when you're on the road and need to get information at awkward times, or when you want long, detailed material to arrive at once. And you can, of course, print mail out on a printer later if you want it to be permanent.

One American company, operating a mature system, have some interesting views. They say that electronic mail tends to be informal in style (as opposed to written mail) and makes people bolder. This encourages those who wouldn't dare to say something direct to your face (and who don't have anything serious enough to say to commit it to a formal, written memo) to send you "brazen" messages.

It reduces the constant distraction of the telephone - unless something's urgent and needs a discussion, you send an electronic note and the

recipient can read it - or ignore it - at his leisure. But you can work all hours because you can get into the system from home.

The Guardian, 1 December 1983.

Even if you are abroad, work can follow you wherever you are - there's no excuse. The office is only a local telephone call away, thanks to the International Packet Switching System. This is relatively cheaper than using the ordinary international telephone lines because the host computers only use fractions of a second to send your message once it has "reached" the nearby exchange, interweaving it with hundreds of others.

Of course, there have to be plenty of people on the system to make it worthwhile - and that is the problem at present. It's a bit like a club. Although British Telecom Gold say that their subscribers are increasing by 15 per cent a month, the number of people we want to contact is limited. It is not suggested that electronic mail will usurp the telephone in the way the telephone took over from the telegraph. But it could threaten traditional postal services by undermining their main source of income: 75 per cent of mail is business mail.

### **Really take off**

The main uses will be for businesses to send material to each other, or to their customers, or as employees "log-in" at home to do work there. A few individuals will send each other mail for social reasons, for "fun", but it may be some time before the present, rather "clubby" nature of the service gives way to much wider use. For that to happen BT has to relax its £100 entry fee and welcome the single user (though you can join a user group and share the cost).

At present the cost of using your mailbox is about 10p a minute, or 5p in off-peak hours. It doesn't cost much to use the system provided that you are disciplined, dumping messages into the memory of the computer to be read after you've disconnected the phone and preparing messages and replies in advance "off line" and then sending them rapidly when you're reconnected again. If you don't do this, then the quarterly bill could really mount up.

It is only recently that completely portable, battery powered micros and acoustic couplers have come on the market able to be used anywhere. It is these which could make electronic mail systems really take off.

*David Allen is the editor of the BBC Computer Literacy Project. He was using a Tandy TRS Model 100 portable computer with a Sendata Series 700 acoustic computer.*

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