

EDITOR'S SUMMARY

While some aspire to minimize traditional email and prefer other communication platforms, email systems have presented strong advantages over alternative messaging channels. The systems offer simple organization and search features and let users personalize categorization based on folders. But a move to Google Apps prompted the author to appreciate the value of tags for managing email content by facets such as date, project and name, singly or in combination. The accuracy of search in email extends to related Google applications. Information architects would do well to rethink features in existing systems and redesign them to meet users' evolving and increasing needs.

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In Praise of Email

by Laura Creekmore

Remember inbox 0? Several years ago, you probably had some friends who achieved this productivity nirvana. Just like several other popular trends, it seems you can't really enjoy having no emails in your inbox unless you tell everyone you know that you have no emails in your inbox.

These days, it's all the rage to brag about not receiving or sending emails (as opposed to those days when we hoped to top each other with the number of emails received). Lots of conversations in my life have moved onto other platforms, like instant messages, texts or other software channels like Slack.

Today, of course, my biggest problem is often remembering exactly where the conversation I'm half-remembering happened. I use so many channels that it's hard to recall where each of my regular correspondents likes to contact me. And if they're like me, and pretty agnostic about the channel – well, heaven help us, since we may never figure out exactly where we had that chat recently.

We all like to bash email – it's right up there with complaining about how busy we are in terms of a modern badge of honor. But I'd like to share a different view with you today.

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I love email.

I really, really love email.

Yes, I text. It makes a lot of sense to text, "Running 5 minutes late," for instance. I am happy to brainstorm on Slack and IM. I'll Skype with you, and I have long debates in Basecamp projects and on Trello cards.

But none of these platforms can touch the utility of my email, and it's all about the information architecture for me.

In every email program I've used except for Pine (dating myself, but there you have it), there's been some form of simple user interface that makes it easy to organize and see metadata about your emails. In most cases, I've depended heavily on a self-categorization system that I've developed over time. Back in the old days, you had to pick one folder to store each email inside.

I try to be pretty disciplined about deleting the momentary emails – the ones that say, "Thanks," "OK," "See you then." But even so, I receive thousands and thousands of communications every year that have potential utility in the future, and I like to be able to find them later. With email, this is not just *possible*; it's easy.

Several years ago, I moved my company and personal email accounts onto the Google Apps platform. I pay a few bucks a month and get email, Google Drive space and more. When I started thinking about switching into Google Apps and out of a traditional email software, using the Gmail format was the thing that held me up for a while. I'd

had a personal Gmail account for a limited purpose for a long time, and I had never fully adapted to categorizing emails with tags, or *labels*, as Gmail refers to them. After many years and a really refined folder system, I was used to the idea of dragging an email into a single folder.

But my experience with content management systems actually taught me everything I need to know about architecting the information in email.

Once I switched my main communications into a system that required me to tag emails if I wanted to organize them, I quickly realized the significant advantage tags offer.

Not only can I file an email – by date, by project, by client name – *I can file the email by every single one of those facets* if I like. Tags handle the complexity of modern communication far better than the old-fashioned, single-stop folder system I'd used for years.

Even better (and not surprising), Google in particular has the best, most accurate search of any email program I've ever used.

I currently use Outlook for a project as well, and the search in Outlook is also really good these days.

Not surprising to those of us in the business, but full-text search on your Mac or PC is not necessarily that

reliable yet. It's getting better – I'm on a Mac and a Spotlight search of my computer today turns up far more detailed results than just a few years ago.

But I still don't always have immediate access to information that isn't in my email program. If you came at me through Slack, or iMessage or IM, I *might* be able to find our chat later when I need that phone number, or the name of the book you mentioned, or whatever other detail I failed to make note of at the time. But maybe not. If I can find it, I will almost certainly spend a lot longer figuring out how to search, searching and sifting through the results, than if we conversed via email.

Now, if you need to reach me, you're truly welcome to use any channel you like. I'm not going to quit using other communication platforms, and I don't think you should either.

I am saying that those of us in the design field ought to spend some time thinking about how we can make the information architecture of newer communication systems work better for users. If we want a platform to transmit valuable information that has a shelf life, we have to ensure that users have a way to recall the information when they need it.

In 2016, email still does a great job. ■