



Friend or Foe?

I asked the Finance Director who he thought was the tail wagging the corporate dog. "IT", he rapped out immediately. I asked the IT Director the same question: "Finance", he snapped.

Have you ever wondered whose side your own IT department is on? Are your IT services delivered in a sensible way, or are some of the questions below true for you? Does your password expire every 28 days, and do you get reminded to renew it after it is 7 days old? Must your password be composed of hard-to-type characters and be so long as to be impossible to memorise? Must every program you use after logging on require its own password, with its own rules? Does the voicemail on your office phone have yet another password regime? Did the auditors find the book you write all these passwords down in?

Email. Love it or hate it, it is essential, but why are all the offerings so poorly-designed, and usually poorly-installed? Is your email address internal-only? Does your email system default to sending out an out-of office message that says "Hi, Fred Smith is away from the office and will return in 15 days. Your message will be attended to on his return". Do your customers desert in droves? Do you get lots of spam?

Does your email system refuse to let email through if it includes a word like "slag" in the text – and then not tell you it has been blocked?

Have you spent a fortune on a program that filters out email attachments based on the amount of flesh tones in the pictures? Has it ever filtered out the portrait of the Chairman urgently needed for the Annual Report? Did you ever employ someone to thus censor conventional mail?

Welcome to the brave new information world. IT once stood for Information Technology. Now it means Ineffective Technology, and is increasingly seen as a barrier between the business and its goals.

The "slag" email cost a large investment bank a great deal of money. The IT-imposed censorship on in-bound emails was designed to protect the firm from law-suits from distressed employees, forced to read upsetting language. That such precautions were not required in the paper communication age seems to have slipped through the common-sense net.

An email offering an advantageous deal on financing the exploitation with modern techniques of the heaps of spoil of former mining operations: "slag heaps", was rejected – and what is more a poorly-written homily of a rejection message was added on top. The client not only didn't get his message through, he was told that he was guilty of using improper language, that his email address had been black-listed, and that he had better watch out!

The banker, in all innocence, got a very hot phone call, and was told that no more business would ever be forthcoming. Trying to claim that it was his IT department cut no ice: the client took the view that the management should be in charge, not IT.

Does your email system do email, or does it do everything else too – work groups, calendars, shared calendars, instant chat, bulletin boards, special naming conventions? Almost certainly

it doesn't allow email to be filed in the same directory structure as other non-email documents on the same subject. Like almost every user of email in the world, two parallel filing systems must be maintained, one for email, one for everything else.

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Britain's NHS awarded a GBP90m contract to build and run an email and directory system that didn't work as expected, fell over after a power surge at a BT data centre (the back-up fail-over couldn't cope with the volumes), and in the end the contract was given up, and taken over by Cable and Wireless.

The projected cost was considered ludicrous from the outset even within the IT world: independent consultant Barry James, who had worked in NHS IT for 20 years, claimed his company could roll out an equivalent system for less than GBP10m.

He told The Guardian: "Of course I don't expect the government to give me this contract - but I want to illustrate the fact that it could be done at a fraction of the cost. You've got to run a yardstick against this to show how ridiculous it is."

One wonders what would have been the cost of asking Google to set up a private version of Gmail, currently given away free.