Commonly asked questions...

After instructing social work faculty, practitioners, and students about the use of e-mail and computer networking, a pattern of recurring questions and themes appears. The following include the answers to these commonly asked questions. They are divided into general categories: 1) E-mail: Introduction; 2) E-mail: What can it do?; 3) Technical Questions about E-mail; 4) E-mail Etiquette; 5) Networking; and 6) Common Jargon.

The questions range from simple to advanced. They can facilitate self-teaching. After you have practiced, these answers can be used to assist others who are learning computer networking for the first time. A cautionary note: The technology of electronic communications is rapidly changing. An answer to a question in September of 1994 may not be totally correct in February of 1995. However, the general principle will remain the same.

E-Mail: An Introduction

1. What is e-mail and how can it be a learning tool or process?

"E-mail" is an abbreviation for "electronic mail." It is actually a modern way of using writing to communicate. Linguists see individuals using language in four ways: to listen, to talk, to read, and to write. Writing, which is the process one employs via e-mail, makes use of certain personal learning strategies that involve people in thought production and expression. In many ways, writing can be a more powerful source of learning than oral expression.

Social work educators have utilized logs or reaction journals for social work training since the turn of the century. Electronic mail is a powerful extension of this tradition.

2. Isn't electronic mail rather impersonal? Isn't the human touch lost?

This is a frequent concern of many newcomers to e-mail. For most regular users, the loss of communication obtained in face-to-face communication through body language and tone of voice is made up through richness in language used. Few regular users of e-mail complain about it being too impersonal. In fact, many find it to be more personal.

3. Isn't e-mail one dimensional?

It is. One can't read body language or listen to tone of voice in the same way. However, that also tends to force the recipient to pay more attention to the content of the message. When one receives an e-mail message, one doesn't know the race of the individual, the age, whether a handicap exists or many other characteristics that interfere with much of human communication. With e-mail, these other variables are downplayed in the communication process. The content of the message becomes the focus.

4. What recommended readings are most helpful for e-mail?

Following is a list of magazines that address e-mail issues:

- BBS Callers Digest
- Boardwatch Magazine
- CompuServe Magazine
- Connect
- Internet World
- Magazine Networking
- Connectivity Online Access

Jim Milles has prepared a bibliography that is constantly updated. The updated version can be retrieved by e-mailing him at MILLESJG@SLUVCASLUEU.DU.

Following are some important titles:


5. I think that the use of e-mail is merely a fad. What makes you...
think otherwise?

One of the authors of this article was sharply criticized by students for “forcing” them to use e-mail. “Why?” the student asked in an angry tone. The author read aloud a passage from Mary Richmond’s book, Social Diagnosis, published in 1919, in which she encouraged social workers to use the new turn-of-the-century technology—the telephone. However, he replaced the word “telephone” with “e-mail.” Like the telephone, e-mail is here to stay. Entry level social workers can take the lead role in introducing electronic communication in social work practice.

E-mail: What can it do?

6. What are the advantages of e-mail? What good will e-mail do for me?

When a social worker uses e-mail, s/he is widening his/her network. One can link with other highly specialized social work educators and practitioners. This is particularly true via the Social Work Discussion Group (see question #23).

In addition, e-mail avoids the problems of “telephone tag.” When I use the telephone, I call at my convenience. The recipient of my call also has to be available at that time. Since that doesn’t happen often, hours are spent saying “I’m returning her call, please have her telephone me when she is free.” The phone call is returned when I’m not available.

With electronic mail, both the sender and the receiver of a message communicate at their convenience. Phone tag becomes a thing of the past.

7. How safe is e-mail in the transmission of confidential information and data?

In terms of confidentiality, nothing is absolutely safe. There is a method of increasing the level of confidentiality.

Regarding passwords: 1) Do not share your password with anyone. 2) Do not let anyone watch you type your password—especially students. 3) Do not write down your password—memorize it. 4) Select a password that cannot be found in the English dictionary or is not a proper noun. In particular, do not use a family member’s name as a password.

A procedure has been developed for the transmission of confidential information: 1) SEND a test message to the address of your confidential receiver. 2) In the test message request the return of the transmission. 3) Use the telephone to make sure that the receiver actually received and sent the test message. 4) Use the REPLY command to send the confidential information and insure that no errors are introduced into the address.

See question 12 for more.

8. Can the use of e-mail and Internet influence one’s social behavior?

Yes. Some students claim that they make strong friendship ties to others via e-mail. In a term paper on the Internet, a student wrote:

“I was enrolled in a sociology course and still worked 30 hours a week. The professor of this course, who by all accounts meant well for he knew nothing of my addictive personality, logged me into the international communications university system (Internet) after reading several of my poems that he thought were worth posting and sharing with others, world-wide. I had my own password, a brand new log-in name, and access to hundreds of NewsGroups. Soon, I realized that there were hundreds of people behind the NewsGroups. People I could talk to. People who would talk to me. People I could converse with anytime of the day. A well spring of conversation with other poets. Internet allows communications across the world. In only a few days, people began commenting on my poetry, phoning me via computer, e-mailing me (basically, computerized letters), and for the first time in all of my 20 years of life, I had a social life.”

9. How can e-mail be used for social work practice?

The term “networking” has a long history in social work education and practice. In traditional social work practice, networking includes ties with other professionals and organizations. For example, a social worker in England was having problems dealing with the “false memory syndrome” (FMS). FMS occurs when a child indicates that s/he has been subjected to child sexual abuse when in fact the child hasn’t. Through the Social Work Discussion Group (sponsored by the University of Maryland), social work practitioners and educators from around the world discussed the topic. We all learned from the discussion and became better practitioners.

10. Does the use of electronic communication affect basic social work values such as the right to self determination, appreciation of human diversity, and so on?
Empowerment is the prime social quality of e-mail. Race, ethnicity, gender, physical disability, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation are all in the background of electronic communication. In the old West, the six shooter was called the "great equalizer." In post-industrial societies, the great equalizer is e-mail.

**Technical Questions About E-Mail**

11. My agency doesn't have e-mail capability. What equipment do we need and how much will it cost?

The answer to this question is extremely complex. Under most circumstances, it is easiest to purchase a service from a commercial network. Following is a list of the major vendors:

- CompuServe 800-848-8199
- GEnie 800-638-9636
- Delphi 800-695-4006
- America Online 800-827-6364
- Prodigy 800-776-3449
- Portal 408-973-9117

However, if you are interested in only e-mail services, vendors include:

- MCI Mail 800-444-6245
- AT&T 800-242-6005
- SprintMail 800-736-1130

Ask friends and former professors for guidance. However, prior to purchasing a service, make sure it offers a "gateway to Internet." The gateway to Internet will allow you to participate in the University of Maryland's Social Work Discussion Group and other Internet services.

12. Is it possible to send e-mail anonymously?

Yes! Anonymous e-mail is an exciting new service available from a computer enthusiast in Finland. This service is particularly helpful for mental health clients who want to secure confidentiality. To discover the protocol for anonymous e-mail, SEND to the following address:

HELP@ANON.PENET.FI

The e-mail should simply read, "help." Johan Helsingius will send directions. He notes that his free service is also available in German and Italian. He ends the English version of the directions by stating: "If you think these instructions are unclear and confusing, you are right. If you come up with suggestions for improving this text, please mail me! Remember English is my third language."

It is not clear if the development of the "clipper chip" by the U.S. government will affect this service.

13. Is there a "best" or recommended way to avoid being overwhelmed by e-mail?

It is very easy to become overwhelmed. Best advice: learn one thing at a time. Make no effort to digest large amounts of information.

14. Is it possible to use e-mail at home? If so, what hardware and software would I need?

Yes. You need a computer, a modem, and telecommunications software. Before purchasing a modem, make sure to get advice from your network provider. Your modem must be compatible with theirs. "Call waiting" telephone service must be temporarily disabled when a modem is in use, since it will interfere with the computer connection.

15. How do I interpret the e-mail addresses to know where an individual is from?

E-mail addresses typically follow an inductive pattern. That is, they move from specific to general. An example of an Internet address is:

MARSON@PEMBVAX1.PEMBROKE.EDU

Moving from left to right, we read the individual's User ID, the "at" sign, the name of the computer, the location of the computer and finally the type of organization. EDU means that the address is located at an institution of higher education. Other common Internet acronyms include:

- COM Commercial Organization
- MIL Military Sites
- GOV Nonmilitary Government Sites
- NET Special Network Machines
- ORG Other Organizations

16. Can I check my e-mail messages from a hotel?

Yes, two methods can be used. First, you can use a laptop computer with a modem and connect it to your hotel phone. Second, many hotels have computers available in lobbies for such usage. It costs about $15.00.

17. How do I select a password and why must I periodically change it?

It is best to select a password that cannot be found in the dictionary and that is not a person's name. Most people recommend that the password includes 8 to 10 spaces of the alphabet and/or numbers. It is of central importance that one selects a password that one will never forget. Passwords must change periodically (usually every 6 months) for security reasons. See question number 7 for more information.

18. If I have a document that I word processed on WordPerfect (or another major word processing program), can I e-mail it? Can I e-mail a document that has been scanned into a file?

Yes and Maybe. One can SEND a word processed file though e-mail. However, because of the embedded commands found in normal word processing programs, the receiver may be unable to read...
the transmission. ASCII is the best alternative. Microsoft Word, WordPerfect, and WordStar offer ASCII options. PC-Write and EVE also can be used. If your e-mail system uuencodes a file before transmitting it, the receiver will need to have the software to uudecode it. This software is available as shareware and can be downloaded from some popular on-line services.

E-Mail Etiquette

19. What does :-) mean?

This is the smiling face. It is used when you are telling a joke or saying something humorous via e-mail. Affect cannot be read via e-mail and computer networking. Experienced e-mailers tell horror stories of how they thought someone else was joking when they weren’t.

There are hundreds of other “emoticons” that have been developed to convey numerous emotions.

20. What common courtesies should be followed when replying to an e-mail message?

When replying to someone, it is helpful to repeat the question by indenting it one space and inserting a “greater than sign” (>).

Generally, if someone asks a question via e-mail, it is proper to respond via e-mail directly back to the same person. It is poor etiquette to post the reply in a Newsgroup or discussion group unless the question was originally posted in that group. It is also considered poor etiquette to forward e-mail to a third party without first notifying the original sender.

21. When should a reply be publicly or privately mailed?

Common sense judgment is best. Protect yourself. One must remember that when a message is sent to an open forum, there are no laws protecting your confidentiality.

Networking

22. What is the Social Work Discussion Group?

The Social Work Discussion Group is an international group of social workers who are linked together via Internet. Commonly, we communicate with colleagues in Europe and New Zealand. The group tackles controversial issues including: the false memory syndrome; jokes regarding NASW and CSWE; problems with DOS 6.2; issues of private practice. Non-controversial issues are also addressed, including position announcements: “Does anyone have information about....”; “Can you help me with a research sample?”; “Can you explain autocorrelation?” and so on. Social work students often use this resource to find citations for term papers.

The Social Work Discussion Group is housed at the University of Maryland.

23. How do I subscribe to the Social Work Discussion Group?

To subscribe to the Social Work Discussion Group. Do the following:

a. Send e-mail to:
   LISTSERV@UMAB.BITNET (or
   LISTSERV@UMAB.UMD.EDU)

b. Do not include anything in the SUBJECT line

c. On the first line of the message type: SUBSCRIBE SOCWORK
   YourFirstName YourLastName

d. SEND the message

24. Where can I find out more about network services for social workers?

Natalie Strangelove offers an excellent directory of networks for both beginners and experienced e-mail users. To get a free copy, send e-mail to one of these addresses:

LISTSERV@UOTTAWA.BITNET or
LISTSERV@ACADVM1.UOTTAWA.CA

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him on those outings. He also plans to organize a wheelchair basketball team in Sioux City, similar to the team he played on when he attended school in Lincoln, Nebraska.

After taking a semester off to relax, Cory plans to apply to graduate school at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. His long-range goal is to work with patients who are paralyzed or have spinal cord injuries.

Cory is philosophical about his accident. "I had a change in my life, but I didn't let it get me down," he says. "I went forward with everything I could because I want to do something with my life. And I want to set an example for others who are paralyzed. I want to say to them, 'There are things you can do, so don't just sit there.'"

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The e-mail transmission must read: Get SOCWORK DIRECCTRY (Do not correct spelling for "Directry.")

Jargon

25. What is Gopher and is there a Social Work Gopher?

Gopher is the name for any menu-based technology which provides access to resources. Menus group related files of information and then organize them into sub-directories under sub-directories. The idea is by choosing a broad sub-directory, we eliminate many other irrelevant choices and get to the information or resource we seek more efficiently. The Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences at Case Western Reserve University maintains a gopher on a wide array of social work topics. To reach it, either use your own gopher software to connect to POVERTY.SASS.CWRU.EDU, or use TELNET to connect to the same address and login as "gopher".

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Want to know more?

Especially for students


General References


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We have all had the support and guidance of a teacher, a field supervisor, or a mentor; and in due course, you will provide the same to an eager student. But for now, this is your time. Work hard, learn well, and you will make a difference. We will be there to help you along the way.

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Because social work has not previously been recognized as a profession in Armenia, students had to adopt creative approaches to their field placements, says Humphreys. Neither professional mentors nor clients were readily available. The students were forced to reach out to people in need, she says.

"It's really exciting to see social work being birthed in Armenia from the very beginning," says Wayne. "Some of what they are doing is like the roots of American social work, going back to settlement house days."

The students showed extraordinary commitment to the program, adds Wayne. Most had to sell their own possessions to pay for transportation to the University, and they and the faculty had to wear coats and boots even in the classrooms to endure the winter cold.

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