'One can't believe impossible things,' said Alice.

'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'
Through the looking glass, **Lewis Carroll, 1872.**

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In an ideal world,
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E-mail use is always at the forefront of system managers' minds (and quite possibly e-mail abuse, at a general manager's level). There are almost always easily found statistics to demonstrate the volume of e-mail that individuals have to cope with in the 21st century, and ALIA National Office is no exception. To find out more about the habits of Association members and their communications with the office, data was collected over a four-week period, just after the installation of a new fibre-optic link to the outside world, and the upgrade to our mail server.

Here is what I found:

Outgoing mail

Each staff member sends, on average, one message every seventeen minutes whilst at work. Since that 'average message' contains 12.8 kilobytes, this amounts to roughly 1350 words, and at an average 24–40 words per minute typing speed (we have staff who are much faster than this, but let's allow some latitude here for those who have yet to migrate beyond two fingers), would have taken thirty to fifty-five minutes to type. The numbers simply do not add up — unless staff type at around eighty words a minute, they will be falling behind.

Therefore, at the end of the day, the office either needs to employ faster typists all round (ninety words a minute should leave time for spell checking), or staff need to send pictures instead — the old adage of a picture being worth a thousand words springs to mind in this instance. Of course, we are dealing with averages here, so there will be those who send a handful of messages per day, and those who spend hours sending e-mail.

However, this does not take into account the time that people take in dealing with incoming e-mail, or reading what they type before sending...

Incoming mail

Each staff member — again, on average — receives forty-eight messages per day whilst at work. Each of these 'average messages' is almost twice the size of an average outgoing e-mail item, but thankfully most of us can read faster than we can type. I have calculated the following figures on a reading speed of 300 words per minute, which may be a bold assumption for some staff who may take considerably longer to absorb text (on a bad day, my speed drops to roughly twenty words per minute...).

Each average incoming message is 215 kilobytes in size, or the equivalent of roughly 2250 words, which would take almost eight minutes to read on a good day, and appreciably longer on Friday after a big lunch. Thankfully, the periodicity of incoming messages averages roughly 9.5 minutes, so there is a leisurely 1.5 minutes spare in which to prepare for the next incoming message, or to take phone calls, or to confer with others. This, of course, assumes that staff do not attempt to compose or send any e-mail at the same time.

What does this mean?

Combining the two sets of data together shows that staff are either losing ground, or a lot of e-mail is wasted (possibly in either direction). It is also clear from a statistical level that all e-mail cannot be simple plain text — if it was, there would be an awful lot of information to digest. Attachments consume far more space than plain text, per word, so it is most likely that much of the traffic in e-mail is of this nature. Indeed, a Microsoft Word equivalent of a one-page document of plain text can be many, many times larger than the plain 'vanilla' copy.

Also, like in many offices, much of the e-mail traffic in and out is effectively 'dead-letter' material — either summary notification of a delivery or non-delivery, or e-list traffic that is often skimmed and trashed.

Identification of e-mail that requires action, or e-mail that is value-adding to the activities of the office and therefore to the Association and its members, is about as easy to determine as an analysis of telephone or postal communications. In other words, there are always overheads that come with the territory, and nothing short of a complete statistical analysis of the traffic would provide useful answers. However, one thing is certain — the sheer quantity of e-mail traffic in and out of any office is often undervalued, and unknown.

In an ideal world, filters would be employed to ensure that only quality information flowed in and out of any mail server. If only television, radio, newspapers and magazines could be dealt with in the same way...

[This article is about 800 words long, which would take just over 2.5 minutes to read, and it took around twenty minutes to type...] ∎