

Finding the right tool to communicate



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Dear Ivan

I read your articles in *inCite* with great interest, especially for the clarity of your writing on complex technical issues. That is why I am seeking your assistance.

I am a zoo librarian (Adelaide Zoo and Monarto Zoological Park). Many years ago one of my predecessors instigated a network (albeit small) of Australian zoo libraries to facilitate communication among zoo librarians and resource sharing. Unfortunately over the years the network folded. I am trying to re-establish it and extend it to all zoo and aquarium libraries in the Australasian region, and today computer technology offers great support for that purpose. My problem is finding the right tool for the members of the network to communicate, to source documents (books, journal articles), and to exchange lists (for example, serial lists).

I am looking for clear and concise information about e-lists, electronic bulletin boards, and extranets: a definition, their purpose, and for which task each of them is most useful. I would be grateful if you could help me by providing such information, and/or by supplying references.

Thank you for your kind assistance.

Silvia Muscardin

Dear Silvia

Thank you for your kind words, Silvia. This is not the first time that someone has asked for an explanation of what the various methods of internet-based communication can be used for, or more importantly, how they can be best used. I'll do my best to explain here.

E-lists are collaborative e-mail communications, delivered by a list server sitting on a host machine connected to the internet. Each e-list has a particular focus, is generally managed by a list owner. A list owner is generally the 'responsible person' to whom enquiries about list operation might be directed, but who might also be charged with the responsibility of moderating messages to ensure that discussions stay on track. The latter responsibility is less prevalent these days, though it really depends on the list focus. People can join e-lists by 'subscribing', using their e-mail address. A valid e-mail address is required to verify any communication to the list. Sometimes e-lists permit non-subscribers to send (or 'post') messages, but this is rare these days. Some e-lists are hidden from public view (invitation only) whilst most are public. Most e-lists permit all and sundry to join, whereas there are some which vet subscribers (decided by criteria, or by list owner). Communication takes place through the e-mail protocol, requiring subscribers to use their e-mail software. In some instances, communications through the e-list are archived and available to those with an interest in previous activity. Some of these archives are available through a web-based interface. Many are not.

A Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) was the precursor to e-lists, in that it was designed to allow people to communicate via a number of different methods without the need for a

unique e-mail address, or a web-connected server. In the early days (before the world wide web), BBS's were only possible via a dial-up connection (or telnet), and were intended to allow simple messages between individuals. Bulletin boards still exist, often to serve a particular subject. In general, there is an equivalent to a 'list owner' who runs operations, and they are mostly known as 'sysops', because they manage the system operations. BBS's have now mostly moved to the internet, and in particular to the web. Bulletin boards still exist (across the internet there are many thousands — ALIANet has a few of its own) in both the original form, and the newer, web-based form. These days, when most people refer to bulletin boards, they generally mean the online version found through websites. These boards permit comments to be added to a page on a given site, and are generally open to the public. A valid e-mail address is often not needed. Most web-based BBS's are threaded, in that the original comment from a 'poster' (the person adding comment) is usually followed in date order by further posts by individuals — and often by a follow-up comment from the original 'poster'. Multiple 'threads' are possible, but are not the norm.

Extranets are private networks that use the internet to securely share business communications. This form of communication is intended for those who require both security and privacy, and requires both hardware and software to ensure both. Firewalls, digital certificates, virtual private networks, and encryption all play a part in maintaining security. The kinds of businesses that require such security are banks, collaborative business ventures, partnerships, communications between employees and employer (if working

apart from each other), and companies that have a direct relationship with others for the purpose of trade, such as wholesalers and retailers, or supply companies and manufacturers. Extranets are, in reality, a private internet within the public internet.

So what works best for communications? It really depends upon what you want to achieve, and how. The internet allows for a multitude of paths and ways to communicate, and record that communication. E-lists are the most 'economical', in that the bandwidth required to spread the word is minimal. The downside of e-lists is that they become 'tunnels of communication', in that if you are outside of the e-list, you rarely hear anything at all. On the other hand, web-based bulletin boards are mostly very public, and easily accessible (no need for a valid e-mail address, for a start), and record all that is written. However, the very publicity of such boards can make them unattractive, or unwieldily if conversations run hot. Additionally, the requirement of a web-interface to communicate can make it difficult to integrate e-mail with board activities (surprisingly few people use web-based e-mail). Extranets are obviously more useful for those with a desire to communicate in private — and I can assure you, e-mail is NOT private! Other things to consider?

E-lists are very powerful once they develop momentum, but have prerequisites. First and foremost: a host e-list server. Secondly, a list owner. Thirdly, subscribers! Satisfying the first is easy if your communications have a library focus: ALIANet has been hosting library-related e-lists for a very long time, and shall continue to do so. The second requirement is harder, in that it requires an individual to co-ordinate and control activities. Depending upon the list, this might be a doodle or a doozy. And finding subscribers who are willing to participate is in the hands of the list owner. Lists live and die through effective communication. Once the communication trails off, the list becomes dormant, until eventually there is little activity recorded.

Web-based bulletin boards can serve a useful purpose, but are these days more focussed on particular issues, and usually with a shorter lifespan. However, they are useful if there is a supporting website to enhance interest in the topic of focus. Indeed, they can work exceptionally well, especially since more and more people prefer to use the web over e-mail for finding information.

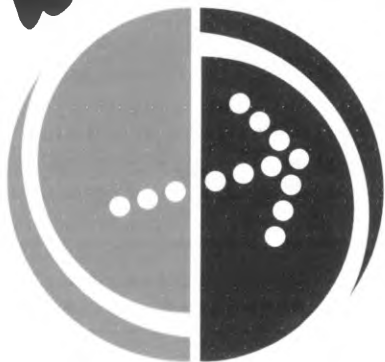
In all, a difficult choice — but my money is on e-lists, for now. ■

...Lists live and die through effective communication.

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