

QL/MAIL - AN ELECTRONIC MAIL SERVICE
THE SUPPLIER'S EXPERIENCE

QL/MAIL - UN SERVICE DE COURRIER ELECTRONIQUE
L'EXPERIENCE DU FOURNISSEUR

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ABSTRACT

In June 1979, QL Systems Limited began to provide an Electronic Mail Service to users of QL/SEARCH, its online Information Retrieval Service, on an experimental basis.

Neither QL as supplier of the service, nor the users, were prepared for the difficulties, surprises, and rewards that lay ahead.

Two years later, QL has an established network of Electronic Mail users who have adopted the service for everything from communicating with QL for regular business, to initiating inter-library loans, and creating data bases on-line.

This paper describes why QL offered the service, the unforeseen difficulties encountered during the test period, the attempts that were made to overcome the problems, and the innovative uses customers have found for the service. It also offers a checklist of suggestions for consideration prior to joining such a service.

RESUME

En juin 1979, QL Systems Limitée commençait à fournir aux usagers de QL/SEARCH, son service de recherche bibliographique, un service de courrier électronique, à titre expérimental.

Ni QL, en tant que fournisseur, ni ses usagers n'étaient prêts pour les problèmes, les surprises et les bénéfices de ce nouveau service.

Deux ans plus tard, QL a réussi à implanter un réseau des usagers du courrier électronique qui l'ont adopté pour diverses fonctions depuis les communications d'affaires avec QL jusqu'aux prêts-entre-bibliothèques et à la création de banques d'information ordinolingués.

L'auteur explique pourquoi QL a commencé à offrir ce service, les problèmes imprévus qui se sont manifestés pendant le projet-pilote, les solutions retenues pour les résoudre et les façons imaginatives des usagers d'utiliser ce service. Elle suggère enfin une série de considérations aux organismes qui voudraient utiliser ce service.

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INTRODUCTION

QL Systems Limited was incorporated in 1973. It was the first Canadian company to provide the public with on-line access to full text and bibliographic data bases concerned with law, parliament and environment. Since that time, the number of data bases has risen to over 60 and the subjects have expanded to include energy, mining, business, northern and arctic science, communications, metals, fisheries, forestry and others.

In addition to the Information Retrieval Service called QL/SEARCH, QL also offered on-line access to a text-editing system or word processing system, but had few customers using this service. In 1978, when QL began looking for a market for its text-editing system, it examined its user base. The majority of QL users were librarians and it was determined that they would have very little use for a "computerized typewriter" appropriate for typing letters, manuals, and so forth. The text-editing system had a 'messaging facility'. This messaging facility would permit any user of the system to transmit any document to another operator. When that other operator signed on to the system, the system would indicate that a message was waiting and the receiving operator would enter a command to retrieve the message and print or display it at the terminal.

"Electronic Mail" had an appeal that captured everyone's interest, and so QL decided to offer its customers access to the text-editing system as an Electronic Mail Service. It was felt that they might be able to use it for inter-library loans, and to communicate with one another and with QL, and it was hoped that once they had learned how to use the service, QL could introduce the concept of having libraries create their own data bases on-line. These data bases could be run on QL for either public or private access and the libraries responsible would have control over adding, correcting, replacing, and updating documents.

THE TEST

We prepared a special manual providing instructions on how to type messages and transmit them, and how to print out messages received. Although the text-editing system has over 100 commands the "Electronic Mail" manual only contained about 20. The new service was advertised in our newsletters, brochures, and at our workshops. We told all our users that they could have free access for one hour per day during a one month test period. Because the majority of QL users are stretched across Canada from Newfoundland to Vancouver Island with the balance dotted throughout the United States and abroad, it was not feasible for QL to provide special training sessions. Free use was provided as an incentive to have users train themselves following the instructions in the manual. The librarians already using the

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retrieval system were familiar with computer terminals and we felt many of them would see this as a challenge.

The test started in June 1979 with a group of 50 participants listed in a Directory we had prepared and it was up to the users to find someone in the Directory with whom they could communicate.

At the end of the one month period, several problems had surfaced. Much of the month had been spent learning how to use the new service and many customers had not had an opportunity to fully appreciate its capabilities. Some of the users who had agreed to participate and who had been sent a manual and a directory never signed on to the service - not even once! Some did not check their mailbox frequently enough. When some participants went on vacation, their mailbox was left unattended. Others became discouraged when they did not receive prompt replies to their messages. The service was being degraded by those not willing to check their mailbox or failing to signon altogether.

During the test period, QL continued to receive regular mail from Electronic Mail participants which could have been more efficiently handled using the Electronic Mail service. This was very discouraging. We felt this could have been an indication of a lack of trust in the service, but more likely it was simply an indication that those customers did not consider use of the Electronic Mail service for their regular work. We believe many saw it as an interesting new service which was fun to play with but they had not yet perceived its usefulness. Of course we could not make use of the service mandatory but could only hope that as time progressed and others talked about the new service and as they became more familiar with the commands, that use for general purpose would finally be realized.

To overcome some of the problems, QL withdrew users who had failed to signon infrequently or altogether and asked all other users to check their mailboxes on a daily basis and to ensure backup during their absence from work or while they were on vacation. A new test was launched with a revised directory and at the end of this test anyone wishing to continue use of the service was asked to sign a contract.

HOW THE SERVICE WAS ADOPTED

By June, 1980, the service was up and running with paying customers and we began to see some interesting results.

Several users had developed their own inter-library loan system. Many customers were using the service to correspond with each other and with us. We received messages requesting assistance with search problems, ordering manuals or other user

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materials, and registering for workshops for our retrieval service. Existing customers began to bring into the service new users with whom they wished to communicate.

Most of the University law faculties which were using the retrieval service to train law students to research our legal data bases began communicating with one another.

One organization requested that all their branch offices having terminals connect to the new service.

One day the Director of the Canadian Law Information Council came flying into our offices with a typist in tow and asked if his typist could type and transmit a speech to the Department of Justice in Newfoundland. He was unable to attend the meeting in St. John's where he was a scheduled speaker and wished to send the speech to some other person who would present it for him. It was typed and transmitted in a matter of minutes.

This year the mailing lists for the Canadian Association for Information Science (CAIS) are being input and stored by the national headquarters in Calgary, Alberta. Because the Electronic Mail Service is only part of a much larger and powerful text-editing system, it is possible for customers to use any of the other commands and capabilities of the system. The CAIS mailing list can be sorted by name, paid or unpaid members, type of membership (student, honorary, institutional or regular). The lists can be used to print labels, lists, envelopes, and can be merged into a form letter. The various chapter lists are stored separately, and the chapters at remote locations can receive up-to-date copies of the list by merely entering a command. This means that current lists are available to the chapters at all times. The chapters may also transmit to national headquarters, the names of new members to be added to the lists. As Membership Chairman for the Ottawa Chapter, whenever I receive a request for information regarding CAIS, I immediately send a message to CAIS National requesting that the name is added to our mailing list. This ensures that that individual will become a recipient of the next mailing.

One user, Doug Vaisey of St. Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, decided to survey users to determine the frequency of use. He sent a message to all users describing his intention and asking how often users checked their mailboxes. His results indicated that almost 90% checked their mailboxes daily, 5% checked once a week and the rest were sporadic. Some checked their mailbox as much as 3 times a day if they were expecting mail.

He noticed that a type of EM ethic was developing. Messages were polite. Everyone who had not replied quickly, gave an appropriate excuse - except an overseas user in Switzerland

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who complained that the message had been too lengthy and that communications were costing them approximately \$1.00 per minute for use.

We also encountered electronic junk mail. Some participants began sending "advertising messages". We haven't tried in any way to interfere with the way the system is being used, however, I understand that customers have reprimanded one another when the type of mail being received was not appreciated.

THE ADVANTAGES

We have been using the service ourselves since the company was first incorporated in 1973 for inter-office memos. All personnel in QL has a desk terminal and everyone from the President down types and transmits his or her own messages. Although we have adopted a standard interoffice memo format for transmitting messages, altering it only to ensure that the sender's and recipient's mailbox numbers are included, short messages are sometimes transmitted back and forth between two persons signed on at the same time in a conversational mode. We have a portable terminal we take on business trips. This permits us to check in with the office on a regular basis. The terminal, which has a built-in acoustic coupler can be used anywhere a telephone and electrical outlet are available. We also use the service to send messages to the person in the next office and this saves interruption and time at both ends. The most apparent advantage of an electronic mail service is speed; however, there are many others. We have suffered mail strikes or the threat of mail strikes and belonging to such a service provides some security that a means of communications will be available in the event of strike. It is inexpensive too. If you already have a terminal, Electronic Mail can be far cheaper than the postal service as you save time at both ends, not to mention envelopes, stamps, and labor. The savings are even greater when you use Electronic Mail to replace frequent use of messenger services to ensure faster delivery.

Electronic Mail is not simply a replacement for the mail and messenger services, however. Its greatest use is as a substitute for telephone calls. If you send a message it will be transmitted even when the recipient is on the phone. His work will not have to be interrupted to receive your message. Usually, less time is required to type a message than to place a telephone call, as messages are most often short, to the point, and dispense with formalities and chit-chat.

As a recipient of messages, you have more time to consider an appropriate response than you would have during a telephone conversation and this results in an improved decision making process. Time zones are not a problem. If you transmit a message at 9 a.m. on the east coast to a person on the West

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coast, he'll pick it up three hours later when he comes into the office. If you are burning the midnight oil, you may still transmit messages to co-workers or associates in your offices or across the country, or even abroad, and they will be retrieved the next morning. And, it is usually less expensive than a long-distance telephone call. Unless you are transmitting messages abroad, the rates are usually the same whether you are sending a message to a person in the next office or to your branch offices in Corner Brook or Calgary.

CONSIDERATIONS

Examine the different services before you buy. There are various types of electronic mail services on the market. Some are one-way systems. It appears that many retrieval service vendors have one-way systems for ordering documents. That means that you can type a request to the vendor, who will carry out your request, but they cannot respond to you via a terminal. It is essentially an ordering service. Some services have a limit on the amount of information you can enter and transmit. For example, you may only be able to enter a fixed number of characters, perhaps up to two lines. Others, such as QL's, would allow you to transmit the Montreal telephone directory if you wished to type it. Some services are really pools to which anyone can submit entries for consideration for other members of the pool. With these, you simply add your comments to a list of others and transmit them back into the pool.

If you are considering becoming a member or a user of an electronic mail service, the foremost consideration will be - who to communicate with! If a service offers a directory of users, you may peruse this to determine if any of the members are persons with whom you may conduct business, however, a more realistic approach is to try and communicate with individuals whom you deal on a daily basis. Examine your own desk. What person or persons are you writing most frequently? Who do you telephone most often? Do these individuals have access to terminals connected to the same networks that your terminal is connected to? Are they likely to be willing to co-operate in establishing a network with you? Once you have found appropriate partners, then it would be helpful to determine how you will work together to get the greatest benefit from the service. Establish a trial period of about 3 months. Determine who will serve as backup in the event one of you is absent. Decide if you wish to be listed in a Directory. It is not always necessary and you may not wish to receive mail from strangers. On the other hand, you may welcome the publicity or opportunity to correspond with persons outside your organization. If you decide to list in a Directory, whose names will be listed, if any, and will you act as a recipient for others in your department or organization?

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Check your mail box at least once a day. Plan to have a meeting at the end of the three month trial period to evaluate the effectiveness of the participation and to make suggestions for improvements and for continued use.

CONCLUSION

When QL launched its service it was not the intention to corner the market on Electronic Mail, rather it was to introduce the QL/SEARCH Retrieval System users to the text-editing system and its many capabilities. Sending messages is a small part of that service and users are now becoming conversant with many of the other features.

We feel our goal has been met. Several users are creating data bases on-line either for private or public access. The WATDOC group from Environment Canada input documents for some of their data bases and even operate programs to update their own data bases. The Federal Department of Justice do too. The Energy Projects data base is receiving on-line document contributions from the federal and provincial energy departments. The documents are being typed and transmitted to data bases from terminals all across Canada. The Canada Centre for Mineral and Energy Technology (CANMET) will be using the service to transfer documents from their mini computer to the text-editing system and transmitting them to our programmers to be added to a new data base on mineral processing.

Electronic Mail can be fun too. It is not always business. We have received Electronic Christmas cards, valentine cards, post cards and even party invitations. Some artistic individuals manage to 'draw' trees, hearts or other objects to enhance to their messages.

This year QL introduced a data base of Electronic Mail users to replace the existing printed Directory. This will ensure that all users have immediate access to the most recent additions and will reduce the necessity for much of the paperwork and regular mailing associated with maintaining the Directory. It will also enable users to search the Directory by Name, state, or province, country, or organization.