

Instant Messaging Moves from the Home to the Office

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INTRODUCTION

Instant messaging (IM) quickly established itself as one of the most popular modes of communication, with millions of people logging in at home, at the workplace, and at school. IM is an Internet protocol (IP)-based application that provides convenient communication between people using a variety of different device types. IM enables two people to exchange messages and hold simultaneous conversations without incurring long distance fees, as long as they use the same IM application. While corporate users employ proprietary systems, end users have several commercial services available to them, such as AOL Instant Messenger and Yahoo! Instant Messenger. With IM, users can exchange short text messages simultaneously as well as learn the online status of other users. This is IM's key feature.

While IM is the newest and most popular "near-synchronous" text-based chat technology, other chat technologies, such as multiuser domains (MUDs) and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) have been used for nearly two decades (Grinter & Palen, 2002). However, IM technology distinguishes itself from these previous chat technologies in several ways. While MUDs and IRC technology provide a chat room that allows a group of people to type in messages that are seen by everyone in the room, IM technology allows just two people to exchange messages. IM users adopt a screen name to represent themselves in the messaging service. So, before one can contact someone through IM, he or she must know his or her screen name. Most IM programs also allow users to search for a screen name by e-mail address, name, or area of interest.

HISTORY OF INSTANT MESSAGING

The first IM system, ICQ (I Seek You), was developed in 1996 by Mirabilis. Realizing that millions of people were connected to one huge worldwide network—but were not interconnected with one another—they created a tech-

nology that would enable users to locate each other online. They released ICQ in November of 1996, and within 6 months, there were 850,000 ICQ users. AOL acquired ICQ in 1998, but ICQ and AIM are still separate systems. According to a recent report by *Business Wire* (2004), with over 175 million registered users worldwide, ICQ is one of the leading communications communities in the world.

Seeing ICQ's mass appeal and usage, AOL released a free IM software application, named AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) in May 1997. Since 1998, the IM market has exploded: Yahoo launched its own version of IM, Yahoo Messenger, and in 1999, Microsoft's MSN introduced MSN Messenger.

FEATURES OF IM

Upon registering for the IM service, a user adopts a screen name that serves as his or her address for sending and receiving instant messages. Users can use e-mail and other applications when using IM. IM users can also create personal profiles that include the types of people with whom they want to chat. While surfing the Web, IM alerts the user through a window that pops up in one corner of the computer screen when a friend logs in. When not in use, that window can remain hidden until the user wants to send a message to notify that an instant message from a friend or coworker is incoming.

Most IM systems provide awareness technology that allows users to monitor the online state of others, using what is commonly known as a "buddy list." This list displays information about contacts and can be sorted into user-defined categories, such as "friend," "coworker," "classmate," or "family."

The main function of the buddy list is to monitor when friends or coworkers are online. To start a session with a buddy, a user double clicks on the "buddy's" screen name. The service gives or denies authorization to send a pop-up window to the receiver's computer. Such "presence awareness" technology is still growing and develop-

ing with more options among IM programs. For instance, MSN Messenger provides several status options to let other users know someone's online presence. Options include *Online*, *Offline*, *Busy*, *Be Right Back*, *Away*, *Out to Lunch*, and *On The Phone*.

The "blocking" option is another common feature of IM systems. With this feature, a user can control who appears on his or her list. For instance, while chatting with someone, you receive unwanted messages. You can click the *Block* button to refuse all messages from that person. Once that person is blocked, he or she will not be able to send messages to you until you decide to remove that person from your block list. You can add or delete people from your block list. Other common features include variation in fonts and text color, the ability to send files and photos, and Web links to favorite Web sites.

IM ADOPTION AND USE

IM has been widely adopted among the general population, and the number of users worldwide is growing exponentially. While the figures vary among research firms, most studies suggest that the number of worldwide IM users is large and will continue to grow. For instance, Conley (2002) reported that the number of IM users worldwide has already reached over 445 million, with more than 225,000 new users per day. International Data Corporation (IDC) estimated that users sent about 900 million instant messages on a typical day in 2000 and will send about 7 billion a day by 2004. IDC also estimates that the number of global IM users will reach over 500 million by 2005 (as cited in Disabatino, 2001).

The United States has emerged as the leading user of IM, according to Jupiter Media Metrix. Their research revealed that the number of IM users in U.S. homes increased 28%—from 42 million in September 2000 to 53.8 million in September 2001. Jupiter Media Metrix also reported that U.S. IM users at work increased by 34%—from 10 million in September 2000 to 13.4 million in September 2001 (as cited in Woods, 2002).

According to the Pew project (2001), the heaviest users of IM are teenagers and college students for whom IM is part of their daily routine. The study showed that almost 13 million teenagers (74% of online teens) use IM, and 69% of teen IM users use IM several times a week. Nielsen/NetRatings (2002) reported that in July, 2002, IM drew 11.5 million kids and teens, with this number representing nearly 24% of the total at-home IM population. According to the Pew project (2002), college Internet users are twice as likely to use IM on any given day compared to the average Internet user. On a typical day, 26% of college students use IM as compared to 12% of other Internet users.

AOL is the predominant IM system in the United States, according to Nielsen/NetRatings (2002). In May of 2002, AOL Instant Messenger became the number one IM application in the United States, attracting more than 22 million users or almost 21% of the total Internet population. Combined, AOL Instant Messenger, MSN Messenger, Yahoo Messenger, and ICQ are the most popular IM services in the United States. Over 41 million American consumers (nearly 40% of the active U.S. online users) used one of these four IM services in the month of May, 2002.

IM IN THE WORKPLACE

After widespread adoption of IM for personal use, IM began to move beyond its consumer-based origins and establish itself as a tool for business communication. In 2002, Jupiter Media Metrix reported that the total number of minutes spent using IM at work increased 110%, from 2.3 billion minutes in September, 2000, to 4.9 billion in September, 2001. By September, 2003, one or more workers in 90% of large U.S. organizations used IM. IM has revolutionized business communication, because it is well suited for communication among dispersed coworkers who face challenges in maintaining ongoing projects. Unlike e-mail, though, IM allows spontaneous interaction among its users, and thereby, facilitates more opportunities for conversation. In this way, IM increases the efficiency of communication among geographically dispersed coworkers.

Studies on IM in the workplace demonstrate IM's value as a tool for supporting brief and informal communication among business partners. However, some studies have found that IM is also used for complex work-related discussions. Nardi et al. (2000) found that IM's primary function is in terms of interaction: quick questioning and clarifications, coordinating work-related activities, scheduling impromptu social meetings, and keeping in touch with friends and family. In particular, they emphasized the utility of IM for facilitating "outeraction"—that is, communication that facilitates further interaction, such as using IM for negotiating availability and scheduling. Muller et al. (2003) found that IM was a means for avoiding certain kinds of communication in the workplace, i.e., to obtain a speedy response to a question, to avoid long telephone conversations, and to seek quick clarification of a question.

Vos et al. (2004) found that most workers used their business IM account mainly on workdays and during work time, and that this IM use was more connected to work-related activities than to personal purposes. Issacs et al. (2002) pointed out the three main characteristics of workplace IM conversations: (1) IM conversations are

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