Congress Online Project

E-mail Overload in Congress

Managing a Communications Crisis

A Report of the Congress Online Project
A Partnership of the Congressional Management Foundation
& George Washington University
http://www.congressonlineproject.org
Funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts

Congress Online Project

E-mail Overload in Congress

Managing a Communications Crisis

About this Report

This report is the first in a series of Online Issue Briefs that the Congress Online Project will be presenting to congressional offices. The project is being conducted by the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) and the George Washington University, and is funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts. This report was written by Kathy Goldschmidt of CMF, with assistance from Nicole Folk, Mike Callahan, and Rick Shapiro.

Contents

About the Asterisk Icon

Throughout this report you will find asterisks in the margins. These indicate discussions of specific House and Senate offices using the best practices we have identified. The Congress Online Project will use this Best Practices Icon in all of our products – especially our Web site – to indicate where best practices are being used.

Introduction

The explosion in electronic communications is dramatically changing the way Americans interact with one another, with businesses, and with government. While virtually all institutions are struggling to adapt to the demands of a "paperless environment," the challenges facing Congress are among the most difficult and contentious. Growing numbers of citizens are frustrated by what they perceive to be Congress' lack of responsiveness to e-mail. At the same time, Congress is frustrated by what it perceives to be e-citizens' lack of understanding of how Congress works and the constraints under which it must operate. This growing tension is exacerbated by several factors.

First, the volume of e-mail to congressional offices has risen dramatically over the past two years. The number of e-mail messages reaching the House of Representatives, for example, rose from 20 million in 1998 to 48 million in 2000, and it continues to grow by an average of one million messages per month. The heavy e-mail traffic generated by the recent nomination of John Ashcroft as U.S. Attorney General slowed Senate servers to a crawl, causing delays in e-mail delivery that lasted hours – and, in some cases, days. This flood of e-mail has been fueled by the ease and speed of online communications, the electorate's growing interest in national politics, and the grassroots activities of lobbyists and e-businesses that are electronically motivating the public to "make their voices heard in Washington." Unfortunately, these advocacy organizations are also encouraging the public to engage in e-mail practices – like spamming congressional offices – that result in unmanageable demands on Congress.

Second, unlike businesses that have the finances and flexibility to rapidly increase their capacity to handle rising demands, congressional offices face budgetary obstacles that make rapid adaptation difficult. For example, offices have received insufficient budget increases over the past five years to deal with these new demands. And congressional staffing levels have actually declined over the past decade.

Third, most congressional offices have not yet taken advantage of the software to efficiently process constituent e-mail. Most offices continue to treat e-mail like postal mail, replying with stamped letters rather than e-mail. They resist upgrading their e-mail practices, in part due to outdated misconceptions they hold about the drawbacks of e-mail. Most offices are responding to the challenge of managing rapidly rising volumes with marginal budget increases by maintaining a communications status quo.

But the status quo is no longer tenable. It fails to meet the needs of citizens who expect greater responsiveness from their elected officials. It also fails to meet the needs of congressional offices that want to better balance their resource limitations with the expectations of the public, but believe that no feasible options exist. Feasible options do exist. Most offices on Capitol Hill could handle e-mail far better by investing in more modern software packages and more training for their Systems Administrators. More importantly, offices could handle e-mail much more efficiently by better using the hardware and software they already own.

Until now, rather than enhancing democracy – as so many hoped – e-mail has heightened tensions and public disgruntlement with Congress. Fortunately, this problem is reversible, but it will require Congress to devote greater attention to addressing it and adjustments in public expectations and e-mail practices. This report provides congressional offices with a blueprint for change. In the following pages we examine the origins and scope of the current problem, present feasible and available solutions for congressional offices to adopt, and provide brief guidance on how the public can use e-mail to be better heard without causing undue demands on Congress. In so doing, the Congress Online Project hopes this report will help turn e-mail and the Internet into valuable tools that improve communications between constituents and their elected officials, and create a more open and accountable government.

Method

To help congressional offices improve their online communications, the Congress Online Project identified, through independent research and interviews with dozens of House and Senate office staff, the best Hill practices for managing constituent e-mail that meet – and often exceed – office and constituent expectations. We then identified some House and Senate offices that are successfully applying these best practices. These offices are models for other offices considering making this transition:

- Senator Jeff Bingaman, New Mexico;
- Senator Conrad Burns, Montana;
- Senator Barbara Boxer, California;
- Senator William Frist, Tennessee;
- Senator Patrick Leahy, Vermont;
- * Representative Rick Boucher, 9th District of Virginia;
- Representative Anna Eshoo, 14th District of California;
- Representative Zoe Lofgren; 16th District of California;
- Representative Thomas Tancredo, 6th District of Colorado;
- Representative Charles Taylor, 11th District of North Carolina;
- Representative Zach Wamp, 3rd District of Tennessee; and
- Representative Heather Wilson, 1st District of New Mexico.

Our research did not attempt to identify every House and Senate office using the best practices. Our goal was to identify a few examples of offices that are using them in order to share their practices and experiences with all other offices. Most of these offices have had their systems in place for two or more years and have undergone a significant learning process from which other Hill offices can greatly benefit.

The Problem

E-mail is fast and easy. As a result, Americans want to use it to express their opinions to any and all Members of Congress. Whenever a contentious issue reaches the public eye, e-mail volumes to Capitol Hill spike uncontrollably. In the last year alone, Congress has been overwhelmed by e-mail about prescription drugs, the 2000 presidential election, and the recent Senate confirmation hearings of John Ashcroft as U.S. Attorney General. Moreover, e-mail volumes remain heavy even when there are no contentious issues before Congress.

The explosion in electronic communication can be traced to December 1998 and the beginning of the impeachment process. Before then, House offices were receiving only a few dozen e-mail messages per week, and Senate offices were receiving several hundred per week. These low volumes were easily absorbed into office mail systems. E-mailers were content with the paper responses they received, and staff barely noticed the difference in their workloads. But when the impeachment process began, offices received a deluge of e-mail from impassioned Americans wishing their views to be heard – and acknowledged. In January 1999, during the peak week of the impeachment proceedings, House offices received up to a thousand messages a day, and Senate offices received up to ten thousand – most from people outside their districts or states who were e-mailing multiple Members of Congress.

Although daily volumes went down after impeachment proceedings ended, they never returned to the pre-impeachment lows. And since then, e-mail volumes have been steadily climbing. For example, in August 2000 – historically a quiet month for congressional offices – the House of Representatives received about four million e-mail messages, nearly the same total the House received in January 1999,

the height of the impeachment. And this volume pales in comparison with the seven million messages the House received in December 2000 during the presidential election recount.

Unlike federal or state agencies, which usually have a central office responsible for managing all computers and information technology throughout the agency, in Congress, each office functions independently. Every Representative and Senator is independently responsible for staffing, equipping, and managing their own offices within their allotted budgets. They want to be responsive and accountable to constituents, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to do so. Rather than increasingly replacing postal mail, as many had expected, e-mail is generating a whole new source of work. With individual House offices now receiving as many as 8,000 e-mail messages per month, and Senate offices receiving as many as 55,000, the burdens on staff are viewed as unmanageable. Moreover, the resources to manage this new work – staff sizes and office budgets – have remained essentially the same since the 1970s. (Although, in December 2001 the House of Representatives provided offices with a significant 9.6% budget increase to help them manage critical staff and technology deficits). As a result, the demands of e-citizens have been wreaking havoc on most congressional offices.

The seemingly easy electronic access to Members of Congress has also fostered a public misperception that individual Members should be accountable to all citizens who write, regardless of where they are from. Advocacy groups and grassroots lobbyists have played a key role in creating these unreasonable public expectations. They have taken the lead in encouraging high-volume, mass communication because they assume that offices will tally incoming e-mail, even if it is not from constituents, and be influenced by high volumes of e-mail that reflect a particular viewpoint. Many organizations have even created mechanisms for the public to spam Congress by sending the electronic equivalent of junkmail. Indeed, fueled by these "astroturf" lobbying practices, the majority of e-mail messages that congressional offices receive come from outside their districts or states. Offices have responded to these non-constituent e-mail messages as they do with non-constituent postal mail – by ignoring them. Most congressional offices are, nonetheless, still burdened with the daily task of hand sorting incoming messages to separate the constituent from the non-constituent messages.

Online technologies are rewriting the rules of communication, but Congress – like most institutions – faces barriers that have made quick adaptation to these new rules difficult. Many congressional offices realize they must change, but it requires rethinking not only their communications practices, but also rethinking their budgeting and hiring practices to support these new activities. The hardware and software they need are requiring ever-increasing percentages of their individual office budgets – as much as 12 percent in some years. This is a financial investment that they did not need to make five years ago. Additionally, where once offices could hire unskilled staff to serve as liaisons with outside technical support, they now need skilled in-house Systems Administrators to effectively manage their more sophisticated systems. Many offices still do not recognize this change in the landscape, but even those that do are facing difficulty competing with corporate America for skilled the Systems Administrators that are in high demand everywhere.

In short, the responsibility for the e-mail problems does not rest with Congress alone. However, many congressional offices have exacerbated the problems they face by failing over the past two years to take advantage of available technologies and strategies that could significantly ease the burdens of e-mail overload. For example, our research found that almost half of all Member offices own software that can automate message sorting and the entry of e-mailers' names, addresses, and other information into the office's database. It can even propose form letters that address the writers' concerns. This software would significantly reduce staff workload and turnaround time. However, fewer than ten percent of all offices actually use it. Many are not even aware they have this capability and most lack the in-office technical expertise to use it.

The remainder of this report will describe the options that are currently available for automating the handling of e-mail. We begin by examining and addressing the obstacles to automating that discourage offices from exploring better e-mail options.

Obstacles to Automating E-mail

Despite mounting pressures for more responsive and timely e-mail systems that answer e-mail with e-mail, congressional offices face a variety of obstacles that make them reluctant to change. Following are the five most common obstacles that offices cite, along with responses or solutions for each.

Obstacle 1 – Message Tampering

Many offices do not respond to e-mail with e-mail because they fear the messages may be altered either en route or by the recipient, resulting in falsified, politically damaging statements attributed to the Member. Many offices are waiting for a technical solution to make e-mail tamper-proof. If yours is among them, you will probably be waiting a long time.

E-commerce projections indicate that these technologies, such as encryption and digital signatures, will not be ready for widespread public use for several years. In fact, while tampering is a possibility, the chances of it occurring are very low. It takes significant technical skill to intercept e-mail, and it does not require e-mail from your office for someone to fabricate a document that damages your boss' reputation. It is also possible, with current and widely available technologies, to create paper facsimiles of letterhead, seals, and signatures. Moreover, failing to respond promptly to thousands of constituents can be more damaging than a falsified message would be.

Our twelve model offices express far less anxiety about tampering than do paper-bound offices. Their experience has reinforced their views. Most of them have been responding to constituent e-mail with e-mail for two or more years, and none has yet learned of any e-mail tampering.

Obstacle 2 – Increase in Workload

Offices worry that welcoming e-mail will generate a greater burden on already over-burdened staff.

In fact, the model offices report that exactly the opposite is true: automated e-mail reduces the burdens on staff. In most of the model offices, staff prefer receiving and sending e-mail to any other form of communication (postal mail, phone, and fax), since technology can automate all the administrative work of e-mail (i.e., entering data, proposing form letters, and routing to staff). Other forms of communication take more time to handle because they must be processed by hand.

In addition to using available technology to automate their systems, the model offices proactively communicate with constituents through e-mail and Member Web sites. This provides constituents with information they value, while reducing the number of incoming messages. Even pen pals are not a problem for these offices. Quick responses coupled with systematic outreach limits the number of people who try to engage offices in e-mail dialogues.

Obstacle 3 – Lack of Resources

Offices feel they lack the necessary resources – time, staff, finances, hardware, software – to manage e-mail. It is true that many offices lack state-of-the-art hardware and software and the budgets to purchase it, but most of them could actually make significant headway using tools they already own.

The standard congressional practice of printing out e-mail, entering data by hand into the correspondence management system (CMS), and responding on paper is becoming an ever-increasing drain on office resources. But it doesn't have to be. Using standard e-mail management software – Exchange, Outlook, or cc:Mail – most of the model offices were efficiently processing incoming constituent e-mail and sending e-mail replies for two or more years. Some of them are still processing e-mail this way. These standard software packages have features that can help sort e-mail and make manual processing by staff more efficient. Because fully implementing these packages require greater technical skill than most offices possess, they are usually not utilized.

Obstacle 4 – Role of the Systems Administrator

Most offices still view the Systems Administrator as an entry-level position requiring minimal technical knowledge. These Systems Administrators – typically expected to act as liaisons between congressional offices and outside technical support – are not, in most cases, equipped to devise and implement the complex technical solutions required to handle rising volumes of e-mail.

The model offices, on the other hand, view the Systems Administrator as a critical position that plays a crucial role in enhancing office productivity. The model offices handle e-mail in a variety of ways that require varying investments of time and money. The one thing they all have in common, however, is a knowledgeable and skilled Systems Administrator. These staffers have the time, skills, and interest to create and maintain responsive, time-saving systems, using whatever tools are available to them – Exchange, Outlook, cc:Mail, EchoMail, or their CMS. For truly efficient e-mail systems, offices must hire, develop, or contract the necessary technical skills to create and manage them.

Obstacle 5 – Perceived Importance of E-mail

Most congressional offices underestimate the importance of constituent e-mail. The general assumption is that e-mail messages are just quick notes or unformed thoughts. Offices figure that constituents will take the time to call or send a longer letter about issues that deeply concern them. As a result, e-mail messages often receive lower priority in congressional offices than postal mail and phone calls.

According to a 1999 study by Juno Online Services, Inc. and ***e***-Advocates, however, constituents do not view e-mail as less important than other modes of communication. In fact, 93 percent of the Internet users surveyed stated that congressional offices should treat e-mail messages as seriously as calls and letters. E-mail can be easier, quicker, less formal, shorter, and less carefully crafted than postal mail, but e-constituents do not view e-mail as short hand. They view it as their primary and preferred form of written communication. In fact, 58 percent of the Juno/***e***-Advocates survey participants stated they would send e-mail to a congressional office before using a more traditional method of communication.

Consequently, congressional offices need to adjust their thinking about e-mail. Timely, in-kind responses to e-mail provide the high-quality service that e-constituents expect, and failing to deliver it reflects poorly on Members of Congress.

Reasons for Automating E-mail

The arguments against implementing better and more responsive e-mail systems are becoming less persuasive with each passing month. Increasing numbers of Americans are becoming "wired" and view e-mail as their preferred form of communication. As a result, the arguments in favor of better and more responsive e-mail systems are becoming increasingly compelling:

- **E-mail is a constituent service of growing importance.** As the growing volumes of e-mail to Congress shows, constituents want to be able to communicate electronically with their Members of Congress. They also expect responses within a few hours, but will settle for a response in a few days' time. A paper reply received weeks later does not satisfy constituent expectations. This is the primary reason the model offices cited for deciding to answer e-mail with e-mail. In the words of one Systems Administrator, "The decision to answer e-mail with e-mail was easy – it's what constituents want. The hard part was deciding how to implement it in our office. It was a high enough priority, though, that we made it happen."
- **E-mail can save staff time.** Automated e-mail systems allow staff to spend far less time on data entry and more time on crafting responses. Senator Leahy's and Representative Boucher's offices find this to be one of the most compelling benefits of their e-mail systems. *

- **E-mail can save money.** E-mail saves postage, paper, and printing costs, especially on targeted mass mailings and newsletters. This is one of the benefits Representative Wamp's office cites for answering e-mail with e-mail.
- **E-mail offers new outreach opportunities.** Using e-mail, your Web site, and postal mail, you can solicit e-mail addresses from constituents who want to hear from you on specific topics. You can then regularly update these people on new developments without investing much time or money. This turns e-mail overload into a valuable communications opportunity, as Representative Wilson's office has found.

Four Key Principles of an Effective E-mail System

Now that we have, hopefully, persuaded congressional offices to reassess their e-mail practices, we will spend the remainder of this report describing how to make these changes. To implement an e-mail system that offers rapid and satisfying service to constituents without overburdening staff, your office should be guided by the four key principles described below. By adopting these guiding principles and implementing practices to support them, congressional offices can turn e-mail overload into a system that saves staff time, provides rapid responses, and communicates with new audiences of constituents.

Principle 1 – Establish and Communicate E-mail Policies

Staff cannot appropriately respond to e-mail without clear policies to guide them. To be most effective, all staff must understand the office policies governing e-mail, including:

- The priority of e-mail;
- The tone and content e-mail should have;
- Expected turnaround times;
- The degree to which e-mail should be automated;
- The e-mail review process;
- The role of the Web site and outreach e-mail in reducing e-mail inquiries;
- The ethical considerations of e-mail (i.e., franking rules, spam and privacy policies, etc.); and
- Record-keeping and filing procedures.

It is the Chief of Staff's responsibility to establish these policies, just as it is the Chief of Staff's responsibility to establish legislative, casework, press, and scheduling policies. These are management decisions, not technical or expertise-oriented decisions. Unfortunately, because e-mail seems like a technical matter, most Chiefs of Staff perceive themselves as ill-equipped to establish policies governing it. Consequently, they frequently leave e-mail policy decisions, along with procedural and technical decisions, to Systems Administrators and Mail Managers.

Unfortunately, most Systems Administrators and Mail Managers lack the political and management experience to best decide these matters. Leaving policy decisions to these staff is akin to leaving legislative policy decisions in the hands of Legislative Correspondents. As a result, many offices are struggling under ineffective policies and practices without realizing they have alternatives.

Chiefs of Staff must recognize that policy decisions about this critical constituent communication require their judgement and input. Systems Administrators and Mail Managers can get technical training and work with vendors and technical support to implement solutions that comply with the policies, but they need clear direction from Chiefs of Staff about what is expected and why.

For example, Representative Wamp made it a high priority to enhance responsiveness to constituents by using technology to the greatest extent possible. To support this goal, the Chief of Staff developed clear policies and expectations for the office e-mail system that addressed turnaround times, e-mail tone, the

role of the Web site in their constituent communications, and much more. She and lower level staff then worked diligently with their vendor to develop procedural and technical solutions to strategically integrate e-mail and their Web site into everything they did. The office is now realizing their goal through a highly responsive e-mail system, an up-to-date Web site, and an office-wide effort to encourage more constituents to communicate with them electronically.

Assistance in establishing e-mail policy is available to House offices from House Information Resources and the Committee on House Administration. In the Senate, the Sergeant at Arms and the Committee on Rules and Administration can help. Leadership offices and Chiefs of Staff in offices that already have efficient e-mail systems are also useful resources.

Principle 2 – Anticipate and Reduce the Amount of Incoming E-mail

Congressional offices mostly react to e-mail. Like postal mail and phone calls, e-mail ebbs and flows depending on the issues in the public eye. However, it is easier to be proactive with e-mail than with other forms of communication because you can quickly and easily communicate with many people at once. By anticipating national and local hot button issues, your office can develop preemptive strategies to reduce incoming e-mail while remaining highly responsive to constituents.

To anticipate and reduce e-mail, staff should be encouraged to remain attentive to potential high-volume issues – including casework issues – so your office can develop proactive strategies to address them. Consider the following options:

- **Send e-mail issue updates.** Satisfy the people most likely to send e-mail by providing them with regular issue updates. If interested constituents have registered to receive issue e-mail, they will recognize that they do not need to continually contact your office to request further information. Keep in mind, however, that in both the House and the Senate, franking rules regarding the number and content of mass mailings apply to outreach e-mail.
- **Provide direct links from the home page of your Web site to information about hot button issues.** Many offices have done this to reduce e-mail about 602P, the e-mail tax hoax. It can also be an effective way to reduce the amount of e-mail on other high volume issues. Provide prominent links to relevant information on and off your site and allow constituents to "self-serve," or get the information they seek without contacting your staff directly.
- **Provide overviews of other important issues on your Web site.** There are some issues that you can be sure will be of interest to your constituents over the next year or so, whether or not your Member is active on them (e.g. education, budget, health care, taxes). You can reduce e-mail requests for this information by providing issue overviews, links to other resources, and the Member's position, if you choose.
- **Answer frequently asked questions on your Web site.** This does not have to take the form of a FAQ page, but providing answers to simple but often-asked questions steers constituents to resources they need without their having to contact your office directly.
- **Conduct online issue surveys.** Many constituents simply want to add their opinion to a tally, and issue surveys are a way to enable them to do this without creating any expectations for a response. Consider limiting access to constituents or requiring e-mail addresses and including a disclaimer indicating that the results reflect the opinions of those who participated, not necessarily the opinion of the district or state as a whole.
- **Provide online comment forms and guest books.** These simple forms on your Web site allow visitors to convey their comments without expecting replies. Constituents can interact with you, without placing any additional burden on staff.

Congressional offices also need to educate the public about how to effectively communicate with Members of Congress electronically. Use your Web site, e-mail, postal mail and other means to convey

to your constituents that e-mail to a Member of Congress has the greatest impact when it is:

- From a constituent, with a name, full address, and zip code included;
- In the constituent's own words, not copied from a form letter or Web site;
- From an individual, not an intermediary organization or Web site;
- Regarding a single issue, not a group of unrelated issues;
- In an easy to read format, with a clear purpose stated in the first paragraph;
- Not attempting to begin a dialogue, which is better conducted on the phone or in person; and
- Directed to the appropriate office: committee business to the committee, and constituent business to the Member's personal office.

Like most Members of Congress, constituents are still trying to figure out how best to use e-mail in their political communications. They will appreciate guidance about how to convey their opinions in the most meaningful way possible, and may begin to understand why these practices make sense. This will not prevent spam, but it will help reduce it.

Principle 3 – Automate as Much of the Process as Possible

For most offices, e-mail is a growing proportion of constituent communications. For example, e-mail now represents 30 percent of all constituent communications in Representative Taylor's office, 45 percent in Representative Tancredo's office, and 60 percent in Representative Lofgren's office. Congressional office data suggest that e-mail is not primarily replacing other forms of communication. Instead, it is contributing to a growth in constituent communications with Congress. Since only about half of all Americans are currently online, the percentages – and the volume – of citizen e-mails will only rise.

The rising volumes mean that offices that are processing e-mail on paper are spending growing amounts of staff time sorting and answering it, rather than taking advantage of the capabilities of computers to automate e-mail processing. The next section of this report, "Options for Automating E-mail," provides information about the software options available for doing so. By automating, you will relieve a growing burden on staff and improve your responsiveness to your constituents.

Principle 4 – Respond in a Timely Fashion

The public expects responses to e-mail in a matter of days, not weeks. If a business can deliver a car a few days after an online order, constituents assume Congress will deliver a response to e-mail in under a week. Constituents want to be assured that their concerns are not lost in a bureaucratic morass, and with e-mail they need to be assured within a couple of days. Consequently, a truly responsive e-mail system that meets constituent expectations must answer e-mail with e-mail.

It's time to make this shift. Constituents expect it, and *all* offices have the technology to do it, even if they have dated hardware and software. Most offices even have the capacity to send e-mail through their CMS, which makes recording and tracking much easier. Nearly half of all Member offices also have the capacity to receive e-mail through their CMS, which, as discussed under Principle 3, can dramatically reduce turnaround time by automating the administrative processing.

By sending concise e-mail form letters from your database, you can answer e-mail on common topics within a few days. When original response letters or casework action is necessary, send interim responses to indicate this and follow up later. This assures constituents that their messages were received and are being addressed. These practices have been adopted by Representative Wamp's office. With their automated system they report that they are able to answer all e-mail within four days, and they answer most in one. Their constituents are pleased with the responsiveness they receive from the office.

Options for Automating E-mail

A truly effective and efficient e-mail system requires state-of-the-art software. There are many software options available to you, but only a few make sense in the current House and Senate technical environments. This section will discuss those options and help you find the right one for your office.

The Four Steps in the E-mail Process

Processing e-mail has four distinct steps. Each step is performed with software; different software packages will allow you to automate these steps to different degrees. Most offices use more than one type of software to perform this process, though some software – fully integrated CMS packages, for example – can perform all four steps. We begin by defining each of these four steps and describing the software options for automating each one:

1. **Constituent interface: the method constituents use to send electronic messages to your office.** To enable constituents to send e-mail, you have the choice of providing a Web-based form or public e-mail address (e.g. contact@mail.house.gov). Web forms – like Write Your Representative and those provided by CMS vendors or created by your office – require visitors to send messages via a form on your Web site or an independent Web site. In contrast, public e-mail addresses allow constituents to send messages using their own e-mail software.

2. **Technical processing: the technical means your office uses to automatically process e-mail before it reaches staff.** Between the moment a constituent hits the "send" button and the moment staff view the e-mail, there are opportunities to process the information it contains and make it more manageable. The most common tools to help do this are filters and rules, EchoMail, and special features available in ACS's Intranet Quorum (IQ) and InterAmerica's Capitol Correspond CMS packages.

   Filters and rules sort incoming e-mail. They are available in e-mail management software such as Exchange, Outlook and cc:Mail. Your office defines keywords – issue topics, zip codes, towns, etc. – for which the software will search and instructions to sort the messages. For example, you could define filters that search for zip codes and rules that place e-mail with in-state zip codes in one folder and e-mail with out-of-state zip codes in another. The messages in each folder could also be sorted further – by topic, for example – with additional filters and rules.

   EchoMail is a sophisticated Web-based service, available only to Senate offices, that uses artificial intelligence to filter, sort, and respond to e-mail. Because it is driven by a highly technical and very complex system, it has the potential to be more accurate than the filters and rules found in e-mail management software. EchoMail, however, is a new product for the Senate – it has only recently come out of a pilot phase – and it is still being tested in the offices that are using it.

   IQ and Capitol Correspond both have modules that can be configured to perform a variety of tasks before staff view e-mail messages. They can, for example:

   - Automatically download e-mail at regular intervals;
   - Separate constituent messages from non-constituent messages;
   - Sort messages by topic;
   - Create or add to existing constituent contact records in office databases;
   - Assign form letters; and
   - Route e-mail to appropriate staffers.

   These two CMS packages perform these tasks in different ways and to different degrees, which

will be discussed in further detail in the next section, "Selecting the Right Software for your Office." Since much, if not all, of the data entry can be automated by CMS packages, however, it will take staff half the time – or less – to process a message and send a response.

3. **Staff interface: the method the staff uses to access, view, and manually process e-mail.** Staff can access and view incoming e-mail in one of two ways: using e-mail management software (Exchange, Outlook, cc:Mail) or using IQ or Capitol Correspond. Messages viewed with e-mail management software will look just like the e-mail that comes to your personal e-mail box. Those viewed with IQ or Capitol Correspond will appear as temporary constituent records that can be modified by staff and approved for inclusion in the permanent database or deleted. Senate offices using EchoMail access and view e-mail using their Web browsers.

4. **Response: the method the staff uses to create and send responses to e-mail**. The most efficient way to respond to e-mail is to use the same software you use for the staff interface. However, because congressional offices depend on their CMS databases to track constituent correspondence and most CMS packages were, until recently, unable to receive e-mail, few offices are using the same software for both staff interface and response.

   Most offices that respond to e-mail with postal mail are using e-mail management software as their staff interface, entering information into their CMS database by hand, and then responding on paper using their CMS. Some offices that respond to e-mail with e-mail are using the same software for both staff interface and response – e-mail management software, EchoMail, or their CMS. Others are using e-mail management software as their staff interface, entering information into their CMS database by hand, and then responding via e-mail using their CMS.

Selecting the Right Software for your Office

The software options described above can be combined in many different ways to create an effective e-mail system. The diagram below shows, in brief, the six software combinations currently available to House and Senate offices for managing e-mail. The discussion that follows describes the benefits, drawbacks, and model offices using each of these different combinations. The diagrams and the discussion are presented in order of most automated and most efficient to least automated and least efficient. Recognize, however, that greater automation and efficiency also costs more to purchase and maintain than lower-tech options. Hopefully, this will help offices determine which option is best-suited to their needs and capabilities.

Constituent Interface	Technical Processing	Staff Interface
Public E-mail and/or Web Form	IQ or Capitol Correspond	IQ or Capitol Correspond
	EchoMail	EchoMail
Web Form	Filters and Rules	E-mail Management Software (Exchange, Outlook, cc:Mail, etc.)
	None	
Public E-mail	Filters and Rules	E-mail Management Software (Exchange, Outlook, cc:Mail, etc.)
	None	

Response software is not included in these diagrams because, in most cases, your CMS package will be the most effective software to use for responding to e-mail. All of the current CMS packages can send batches of e-mail, just as they can send batches of postal mail, but only IQ and Capitol Correspond can currently receive e-mail. Because most offices want to record and track all correspondence, including e-mail, you will probably want to integrate e-mail into your CMS through the most expedient means possible, even if it means having staff enter it by hand. If you are unable to use your CMS to answer e-mail, you should respond to e-mail using the same software you use for your staff interface.

Option 1: Fully CMS Integrated

Constituent Interface	Technical Processing	Staff Interface
Either Public E-mail or Web Form	IQ or Capitol Correspond	IQ or Capitol Correspond

This is the most efficient way to manage incoming e-mail. IQ and Capitol Correspond can integrate incoming e-mail correspondence into existing constituent databases, automate e-mail processing, and enable batching of outgoing e-mail to different degrees. As a result, they provide clear advantages over the other five options. They save significant staff time, and they ensure that e-mail is recorded, processed, and tracked along with all other correspondence.

If yours is among the offices that already own IQ or Capitol Correspond's Web Respond module, your best option for answering e-mail efficiently is to begin using it. Both of these packages process e-mail from Web forms very efficiently by automatically placing the information from the form directly into appropriate fields in temporary constituent records. These records can then be reviewed and modified by staff, approved for permanent inclusion in your database, or deleted. Both packages also offer a variety of useful tools to sort the messages from Web forms, match incoming e-mail with existing constituent records, propose form text for response, and route messages to appropriate staffers.

IQ also has features that enable it to scan and automatically process messages from public e-mail addresses in much the same way it processes messages from Web forms. Messages that it cannot process are placed in a separate location for staff to manually review and process. Capitol Correspond cannot automatically process messages from a public e-mail address, but it is more efficient than the other five options because it integrates public e-mail into the CMS and makes data entry easier for staff. This prevents staff from having to print the messages or cut and paste from them to include the information in the CMS database.

Both of these software packages are also flexible enough to allow you to define the process that works best for your office. However, they are both sophisticated software packages that will require your office to work closely with the vendor to set up and hone. Your office will also need someone with technical knowledge to operate, customize, and manage these systems effectively.

Nearly half of all House and Senate offices already own one of these CMS packages, but most lack the technical skill necessary to implement the e-mail integrators. Of the offices that do not own IQ or Capitol Correspond, many lack both the financial resources and the technical skill to purchase and effectively operate them. Moreover, these packages require up-to-date servers and desktop computers because they tax the memory and storage space of older computers. An office may need to invest $50,000 or more – a significant portion of its budget – in hardware and software. As a result of the significant financial investment and technical skills required to effectively implement a CMS solution to e-mail, few offices have done so. *

Senator Leahy's office is one of the few offices to have implemented this option. Last September they

began to automatically process e-mail from their public e-mail address, and they have been pleased with the responsiveness they are providing and time-savings they are realizing. They do not offer a Web form because they, like many other offices, found that their constituents objected to being forced to use a Web form to communicate with them.

* Using this option, Senator Boxer's office was successful in answering 20,000 constituent messages from both their public e-mail address and their Web form in January 2001. Both Representative Eshoo's and Representative Wilson's offices have been successfully using this option for quite some time, and Representative Wamp's office recently implemented this option. All report that it is saving staff time, while at the same time enabling them to be more responsive to constituents.

Option 2: EchoMail (Senate Only)

Constituent Interface	Technical Processing	Staff Interface
Either Public E-mail or Web Form	EchoMail	EchoMail

EchoMail has the potential to make sorting and responding to incoming e-mail much easier, since it uses sophisticated technologies that enable it to identify the tone and meaning of messages and process them based on the parameters an office defines. For example, EchoMail is designed to differentiate opinions, information requests, casework, and complaints, and process each of these according to the office's instructions. EchoMail also has the capacity to automatically identify and send form e-mail responses to constituents, if an office decides to implement this option. To implement EchoMail, a Senate office must subscribe to the service and establish parameters for scanning, sorting, and answering incoming e-mail. The office then accesses, views, and processes the messages using their Web browser. EchoMail has the potential to be much easier to set up and use than filters and rules, but since it is a new product for the Senate, the offices that are using it are still adapting to its interface. Messages that are processed with EchoMail cannot currently be automatically integrated into CMS databases, so constituent information must be entered by hand, if at all. The company that produces EchoMail is working with

* the CMS vendors to find a solution, and expects to offer an e-mail integrator soon. EchoMail is also still being customized to meet the needs of Senate offices. The offices using it report a variety of successes and frustrations. Senator Frist's is one of these offices, and the office reports that they are optimistic about the system, but are still working to tailor the system to their expectations and satisfaction.

Option 3: Filtered Web Form

Constituent Interface	Technical Processing	Staff Interface
Web form	Filters and rules	Exchange, Outlook, cc:Mail, etc.

Web forms, accessed via your Web site, give you the opportunity to "interact" with people *before* they send you e-mail. This enables you to better target constituents and reduce the amount of incoming e-mail. For example, you can use your Web site to provide answers to frequently asked questions. You can also offer instructions about who you respond to and why. And by requiring users to provide identifying information before communicating with you, you can ensure that you have the data you need to separate constituents from non-constituents. These features will help encourage non-constituents to contact their own Members of Congress while enabling constituents to effectively communicate with you. By using these features, you can control how e-mail comes into the office, from whom, and the format it will take, so processing is easier. Web forms also make filters and rules more effective

because the information you receive and the format in which it is presented are uniform. This makes it easier for filters and rules to scan and process incoming messages according to the parameters you define. Together, Web forms and filters and rules can make prioritizing and processing incoming e-mail very efficient. However, constituent information must still be entered into the CMS by hand, if at all. The primary drawback of using Web forms as the constituent interface is that constituents prefer to communicate with their Members of Congress via public e-mail. Public e-mail is faster, easier, and more user-friendly for a constituent, but more difficult for an office to process. This option is the most common option currently exercised in the House and Senate, but none of the model offices are using it. The model offices that are using Web forms have integrated them into their CMS for technical processing and staff interface, and they all accept public e-mail, in addition to e-mail sent via their Web forms.

Option 4: Basic Web Form

Constituent Interface	Technical Processing	Staff Interface
Web Form	None	Exchange, Outlook, cc:Mail, etc.

This option still offers the advantage of being able to "interact" with people before they send you e-mail, which, as with the previous option, will help target constituents and reduce e-mail. If you use Web forms without filters, rules, or CMS processing, however, staff must review and respond to each e-mail individually, and constituent information must be entered into the CMS by hand, if at all. This makes this option fairly time-consuming for staff, though it is still more efficient than Options 5 and 6 below. Being Web based, this option also has the drawback that, as mentioned above, constituents prefer to use public e-mail. Many House offices that receive e-mail via Write Your Representative are processing incoming e-mail this way, as are many Senate offices that have posted their own Web forms. None of the model offices are using this option.

Option 5: Filtered Public E-mail

Constituent Interface	Technical Processing	Staff Interface
Public E-mail	Filters and Rules	Exchange, Outlook, cc:Mail, etc.

Applying filters and rules to public e-mail makes it more manageable than unfiltered public e-mail, but for most offices this will be one of the most inefficient and time-consuming options. Using tools in your e-mail management software, you set up parameters that enable the software to scan messages for keywords and sort them into folders or delete them. By looking for zip codes or towns, filters and rules can help identify constituent e-mail. By looking for words relating to high-profile issues, filters and rules can enable staff to respond to all messages on one topic at a time, improving their efficiency. However, sorting is only as effective as the parameters you define, and truly effective filters and rules require careful planning, a skilled Systems Administrator, or both. With this option, constituent information must be entered into the CMS by hand, if at all. *

Currently, Representatives Tancredo's and Taylor's offices are both efficiently processing their public e-mail using sophisticated filters and rules in Microsoft Outlook and Microsoft Exchange, respectively. These offices are successful with this option because they have highly skilled Systems Administrators

who have been able to strategically create and modify their filters and rules to handle the changing tides of incoming e-mail. Senator Burns' office has also been successful using more simple filters and rules, but since it has required them to dedicate a full-time staffer to the task, they are planning to implement an automated system in the near future to improve efficiency.

Option 6: No Automation

Constituent Interface	Technical Processing	Staff Interface
Public E-mail	None	Exchange, Outlook, cc:Mail, etc.

* This is the most time-consuming way to process e-mail. E-mail comes into the office e-mail address as unformatted text, just like the personal e-mail you are used to seeing. Because no technical processing is used, staff must review each message and react to it individually. As a result, they must accord the same amount of time to reviewing spam and non-constituent e-mail as to reviewing constituent e-mail, since there is no way of differentiating them without reading them. Once the e-mail is sorted, constituent information must be entered into the CMS by hand, if it is entered at all. Only after staff review and sort the e-mail and enter the data by hand can they turn their attention to responding to the constituent messages. As a result, many offices that use this option have decided not to spend time on data entry. For all these reasons, this option is unwieldy for most offices. Senator Bingaman's office has been successfully responding to public e-mail this way for several years, though they now use a Web form that is integrated into their CMS in addition to this option.

Conclusion

The underlying American democratic value of communication between citizens and elected officials has its roots in the town hall meeting, where, for centuries, constituents have been coming together with their elected representatives to discuss the issues that most concern them. The people want to be heard, and elected officials want to listen and respond. Now technologies exist to do this without leaving home or office, and constituents are motivated to use them.

E-mail has the potential for a profound and positive impact on our democratic system. If effectively utilized, the public – including interest groups – could engage in a more open and informative dialogue with their elected officials, improving communication, and potentially reducing the cynicism and common misperceptions that currently weaken public confidence in government. It also offers Members of Congress the opportunity to find new ways to fulfill the Founders' dreams of a transparent, responsive, yet deliberative, Congress. Unfortunately, grassroots activists, the general public, and congressional offices all have misperceptions about how to effectively use e-mail that are limiting the value of this important communications tool.

Grassroots activists' practices of encouraging and enabling citizens to send messages to all Members of Congress are akin to flying any interested person in the country to attend a Member's town hall meeting. The public's expectation to receive responses from Members who do not represent them is like their showing up at the town hall meeting and demanding to be treated like a constituent. Members' inefficient and unresponsive e-mail practices are akin to keeping constituents waiting in long lines for hours before letting them into the town hall meeting. Instead of fostering democracy, these conflicting practices and expectations of all the parties are fostering cynicism and eroding trust. This predicament requires that grassroots activists, the public, and Congress all find new approaches to their online

communications. The Congress Online Project recommends the following.

First, grassroots activists should adopt a code of conduct to engage in electronic lobbying practices that:

- Target individuals' own Members of Congress – and *only* their own Members of Congress;
- Send meaningful messages, not "electronic postcards;"
- Avoid sending duplicate messages from the same person;
- Encourage people to speak in their own words;
- Does not foster the expectation that citizens should correspond with – and expect a response from – any Member of Congress with whom they choose to communicate; and
- Provide complete identification information, including name, address, zip code, and e-mail address.

Second, citizens must recognize that congressional offices are not, and cannot be, capable of responding electronically to every American and limit their e-mails to communicating with only their elected representatives. Due to the large and growing volumes of e-mail congressional offices are receiving, electronic communication should be confined to Member-constituent communications..

Third, both the House and Senate should consider increasing the budgets of Hill offices to help them manage the demands of e-mail, or develop other means of providing these offices with the assistance they need to solve this problem.

Fourth, congressional offices must expedite the transition to operating efficient and responsive e-mail systems. The dated practices offices are adhering to become less practical with each passing month, as greater numbers of Americans become "wired." Continuing to process incoming e-mail manually is a costly drain on office time and resources. Continuing to answer e-mail with paper fails to meet the timeliness and responsiveness constituents expect. Continuing to cling to misconceptions about e-mail causes congressional offices to appear behind the times and resistant to change.

In this congressional e-mail standoff, there are no winners, only losers. The interests of no party – congressional offices, constituents, the general public, and public interest groups – are being met. Electronic communication has the potential to strengthen our democracy. It holds the promise of creating greater openness and a broader dialogue between Members of Congress and their constituents. To realize this potential, however, the public, activists, and Members of Congress must all become better users of the powerful tools they possess.

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge the important contribution of **The Pew Charitable Trusts**. Without the funding provided by a generous grant from Pew, this report and the work of the Congress Online Project would not be possible. Our project represents part of Pew's commitment to strengthening democratic life in America and improving public understanding of – and confidence in – government.

We also offer our deep gratitude to the many staff at House Information Resources (HIR) and the Senate Sergeant at Arms who provided us with information and assistance throughout our research and writing process. These organizations are both deeply committed to providing House and Senate offices with technical information, guidance, and support to enable them to fulfill their legislative and representational responsibilities effectively in the Information Age. We are indebted to both of these organizations, and we sincerely appreciate the insights and feedback we received from their staffs, who took the time and effort to help us craft this important resource for congressional offices.

In addition, we wish to acknowledge and thank the many House and Senate staff members who volunteered their time and expertise to answer our innumerable questions about topics both vital and arcane, review the many drafts of this report, and provide their ongoing support to the work we are doing.

Specifically, we would like to thank:

Lynden Armstrong, Systems Administrator, Office of Senator Domenici and President of the Senate Systems Administrators Association

Steve Leraris, Systems Administrator, Office of Senator Feinstein

Marlo Meuli, Systems Administrator, Office of Senator Nickles

Ngozi Pole, Systems Administrator, Office of Senator Kennedy

We would also like to tip our hats to the many staff in our model offices who provided us with detailed information about their e-mail systems and never seemed to tire of our many calls and questions. These offices are to be commended for their excellent e-mail systems, and for the Chiefs of Staff and Systems Administrators who made them possible.

Lastly, we extend our gratitude to Dina Moss. As always, Dina's thoughtful comments and meticulous editing greatly improved the quality and readability of this report.

About the Congress Online Project

The Congress Online Project is a two-year program funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and conducted jointly by the George Washington University and the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) to examine the use of Web sites and other forms of online communications by congressional offices. The goal of the project is to improve electronic communication between Members of Congress and the public.

Over the next two years, we will conduct focus groups and survey research with constituents, members of the traditional and online press corps, interest groups, and others to solicit their impressions and expectations of congressional online communications. We will also be spending considerable time with House and Senate Member office, committee, and leadership staff and technology specialists to discuss the ways they are using and would like to use the Internet to communicate with their constituents. In addition, we will conduct research and interviews with public sector, private sector, and international Internet pioneers to discover innovative practices that can be applied to congressional Web sites.

We will communicate the results of our extensive research through a series of Online Issue Briefs, reports, newsletters, training programs, conferences, and regular updates to our project Web site.

At the heart of this project, however, are two annual reports to define Best Practices for congressional Member, committee, and leadership offices. In these reports we will describe the Best Practices we identify; award the Hill Web sites that most effectively apply the Best Practices; and provide resources and recommendations to help congressional offices adopt the Best Practices.

This valuable research and information will be brought to Members of Congress and the public by the dedicated project staff from George Washington University and CMF.

The George Washington University, through its Graduate School of Political Management (GSPM), conducts research into the opportunities and challenges facing elected officials. GSPM is working on a number of projects that investigate the impact of Internet technologies on politics and government.

CMF is a non-partisan, non-profit organization that provides management publications, programs, and services for House and Senate offices. For the last three years, through its Technology Initiative, CMF has been providing services and resources to help congressional offices respond to the challenges and capitalize on the opportunities information technology provides.

If you are interested in learning more about the Congress Online Project, would like to share ideas, or pass on the name of someone you think could be useful to our study, please let us know. We can be contacted via our Web site, at http://www.congressonlineproject.org.