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inside:

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apropos

Beware of What You Wish For

I was first introduced to networking as a student at UC Berkeley. I vividly remember sitting in the terminal room on the west end of campus complaining out loud that I'd like to be able to get help from my CS TA up on the east corner of campus. The person next to me suggested I try "talk"ing to my TA. I could tell by the inflection in his voice that he didn't mean a face-face conversation, but I wondered what other mode of communication he was suggesting. He proceeded to walk me through using the UNIX who command to see if my TA was online and then the talk command to initiate an electronic conversation. I was amazed. Of course, I did the typical newbie-thing and assumed my TA was just as thrilled with this "new" method of communication as I was. After a half dozen questions via talk he suggested I come see him and gave me the "over and out" salutation. It didn't matter that I had been disconnected by the TA; I had been introduced to a whole new world of communication possibilities, and just like with electronic mail, I was hooked.

As I began my career in computers, I remained as enthusiastic about electronic communication as I was that day I discovered talk. I evangelized about the fledgling Internet to family members and friends, told all how neat I thought it was. I was convinced that everyone would think it was as great as I did. I always celebrated an addition to my list of email-capable friends since, from my perspective, electronic mail is often the most efficient form of communication as it virtually eliminates telephone tag. For example, since my brother lives overseas, having him online was particularly convenient. It didn't take my parents long to recognize that email was far easier and more consistently reliable than their traditional options of telephone, telegraph, or paper mail.

Professionally, as well as personally, I wanted to see the Internet grow. I was always eager to meet others who also loved the technology that made it easier to "talk." I sought out organizations that encouraged information exchange. The free exchange of technical knowledge among professionals increased my love of networking. I envisioned a day when "everyone" would be connected and there would be huge innovations in information sharing as well as personal communication. The advent of the World Wide Web and e-commerce, which served as the catalyst for getting folks online, brought about my wildest dreams. It seems everyone is on the Net now. I keep in touch via the Internet with people who have no professional association with computers. My kids all have accounts, I meet people I share hobbies with, I purchase items – why, even my parents got online this year!

Sadly, the online craze may have ushered in greater personal communications, but increasingly I've seen an unwillingness to share professional information. Often when I approach colleagues to write about their organization for *;login:* they are restricted from sharing that information, citing how it could somehow reveal trade secrets. This has been the case with Computer Use and Security policies for years. No one wants to reinvent the wheel in this area, but it seems it's next to impossible to get organizations to share these. It's hard for me to imagine Computer Use policies revealing the corporate jewels. This information blackout even seems to impair peer relationships that could help organizations. I know of more than one prominent Internet company that refused to compare notes with their peers, even when they were under attack by the same crackers. Seems counter-productive to me.

Communication and information sharing is at the heart of why I like computers, or more specifically, why I like networks. Now that it's gone mainstream, however, some of the information exchange that it fostered seems to have gone with it. Beware of what you wish for.

by Tina
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