

# Federal Computer Week

July 5, 1999

## Senate adopts advanced mail management

BY MARGRET JOHNSTON  
([margret\\_johnston@fcw.com](mailto:margret_johnston@fcw.com))

The technicians responsible for the Senate's e-mail systems mark the release of independent prosecutor Kenneth Starr's report as a significant event in the evolution of Congress' use of e-mail.

Before the report's release last year, the e-mail system that served the 100 Senate offices processed about 25,000 e-mails a day, said Steve Walker, manager of the World Wide Web and technology assessment branch of the U.S. Senate Sergeant at Arms. That number rose steadily, peaking at about 500,000 each day during the impeachment trial. But even now the server handles about 50,000 messages a day.

"It spikes depending on what hot issues are being discussed," Walker said. "We've also noticed more and more places where you can go on the Web and write your representative. They themselves breed more e-mail to the Senate."

As the volume of Internet mail increases, the number of regular letters is dropping off, and that trend is expected to continue "because it's a whole lot easier to go onto the Net and pop off an e-mail," Walker said. If constituents feel their e-mail messages are given as much attention as traditional letters, more people are going to take the electronic route, he said.

The Senate is coping partly through the installation of software with an artificial-intelligence component designed to automate the handling of e-mail. This week the Senate will become the first federal organization to begin installing the software package, called EchoMail.

The technology was sold to the Senate by General Interactive Inc., a Boston-based company whose customers include major customers AT&T Corp. and Nike Inc. V.A. Shiva, the company's president, said Congress always has viewed e-mail as a problem but now has an opportunity to improve its information services. "This is a platform for e-mail relationship management," he said.

Few members of Congress use e-mail to communicate with constituents, according to a survey of 200 House and 70 Senate offices about their Internet use. The survey, conducted by Bonner & Associates and American University in early 1998, also showed that only about 15 percent of those surveyed use e-mail to keep constituents up to date on issues that might be important to them.

EchoMail, which will be piloted by two undisclosed Senate offices before being made available to all senators, can analyze messages to predetermine the writer's issue, determine whether the writer is pro or con on an issue and even measure the level of emotion used in the message.

EchoMail can, for example, route a message about gun control to the staff member who handles that issue so that an appropriate response can be prepared, Shiva said. If the same message mentions abortion, the staff member who handles that issue also will get the e-mail.

EchoMail, however, goes beyond sorting e-mail, offering features that can automate many routine responses and ensure that senators receive mail only from constituents. And it can protect against spammers by detecting numerous copies of the same message and automatically deleting them, Shiva said.

Senators "want to absolutely make sure they get any message from their constituents but not necessarily every message sent to every senator or from every known hacker site," Walker said.

Those features of EchoMail are "right up front," meaning that useless messages can be discarded at the server before they go to a senator, Walker said.

Other automatic functions make it possible to generate replies that include excerpts of a senator's position papers, speeches and other documents pulled from a database without a staff member even looking at the message, Shiva said. The level of automation is up to users.

The software also gathers information about the sender, and that information can be used to communicate with a particular group, such as mothers who are registered Democrats. And it creates accountability for the staff, Shiva said. "No one can say, 'I don't know what people are thinking,'" he said. "The data is right in front of them."

Walker said the installation of EchoMail is just getting started and that it will be at least two months before EchoMail is available to all senators. At that point, all e-mail sent to publicly advertised e-mail addresses will be sent to the EchoMail system, including all e-mail sent to Senate committees, Walker said. Offices will access the e-mail through a Web browser, so no additional software is needed on the desktop.

Walker said he expects a range of difference in how senators use the software. "I don't think any of them are going to do auto-mail right away," he said. "They are all going to want to have a person take a look at it, and it will take some time to customize it for each office and make them comfortable with it."

However, the deployment of EchoMail shows that the Senate has come a long way over the past several months in how it regards e-mail, Walker said. "I think everyone has realized now this is important and how much it belongs to the future," he said.