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MANAGING AN ELECTRONIC LIST (A LISTSERVER)

By Gad Engler

For the past year or so my responsibilities in SLA have included the management of two electronic lists: SLA-ENG for the Engineering Division, and SLA-ST for the Science-Technology Division. This may be a good time to reflect a little on what it takes to set up and manage an electronic list.

Definitions

What is an electronic list?

LISTSERV is a brand name commonly confused with generic software for the management of electronic lists. The terms "listserver" or merely "list" are perhaps somewhat better names for the generic. But whatever its name, the essential function of the software is the broadcasting of electronic mail messages to its multiple subscribers. It thus extends the usefulness of ordinary electronic mail.

The users of the list, as well as its manager, control the software through commands embedded in mail messages which are sent to the list's address. HELP, SUBSCRIBE and UNSUBSCRIBE are some examples of such commands. The HELP command prompts the listserver to send the user a message that explains several important commands available to the user. It also lists the address to which these commands must be sent. The address for sending

commands is usually different from the one for broadcasting informative content to the subscribers.

Requirements.

Before one can even contemplate managing a list, certain obvious skills need to be mastered. You need to be able to manage your own electronic mail. It is important to be able to save messages in multiple subject folders, and it is crucial to be able to edit incoming messages and forward them to the appropriate recipients. You also need to subscribe to various lists, read their welcome messages, and learn to customize your subscriptions. The DIGEST command, for example, is useful for heavy-traffic lists. It instructs the software to broadcast in a single message a concatenated series of individual messages.

The planning stage begins in earnest when you observe a need within your organization that could be satisfied by a list. Approach the appropriate decision maker(s) with a raw idea regarding the purpose, anticipated benefit, and policies of the proposed list. If the idea is well received, the likely response will be, "Yes, but what are the resources that we need and how do we get them?"

You obviously need a computer that has access to the Internet. It need not

necessarily be high powered, but it must be reliable (you want to minimize down time). The next thing to consider is software. Some packages are available as freeware, while others need to be purchased. Assuming that you are not hired to administer computing services, your most crucial resource and ally will be the system administrator. He or she will help greatly by choosing, installing, debugging and customizing the software. Once the list is up and running, the demands on the system administrator's time will drop sharply, and you will be doing most of the routine troubleshooting. But the system administrator must remain available at all times should an unusual problem arise.

All this assumes that you have the approval of your supervisor, which may prove to be the most difficult resource to acquire. Does the management of the list fall within your job description? If not, you will probably have to manage the list on your own time. If the management of the list does fall within your job description, you will still have to reconcile the mission of the list with your job responsibilities. Your organization will also have to contribute the system administrator's time. It is also possible that some other organization will contribute the necessary resources. In that case you will probably communicate with the system administrator and the decision maker through electronic mail. They will be doing their part on their side, and you will have only to say, "Thank you!".

Once the consent of the relevant parties to the raw idea is obtained and the use of other resources is approved, the time has arrived in which a detailed

conception of the purpose and policies of the list need to be articulated. This stage is not dissimilar to that of conceiving a new publication such as a magazine or newsletter. What value will the list offer to its subscribers? How will it be different from other similar lists? What activities will it encourage? What practices will it discourage? Will your management style be intensive and proactive or laid-back? What will the list's attitude be toward attempts to introduce censorship? How will you respond to unsolicited advertising? This is the time to approach the decision maker and develop working relations regarding issues of policy. Some of these issues will have to be stated in the welcome message that new subscribers receive. The composition of this document and the polishing of its specifics in consultation with your decision-maker are your last major tasks before launching your precious little baby into cyberspace.

Launching the Project

Now you are ready to set a date for launching the list. A short announcement describing the new list and explaining how to subscribe can be sent to appropriate established lists. A similar announcement can be placed in print publications. Be sure to test the list extensively before you set a launch date. Also make sure that both you and the system administrator are present and available on the launch date.

Once the word gets out, people will (hopefully!) start subscribing to the list. You can expect a steady increase in the membership over the first few weeks or months. At first not much will happen besides the traffic of new subscriptions and perhaps some cancellations. To jump

membership over the first few weeks or months. At first not much will happen besides the traffic of new subscriptions and perhaps some cancellations. To jump start the list, it may be advisable to post some interesting messages yourself. At this stage you are no longer a coordinator scrambling to define and create a new service. Your job now is to observe what happens on the list, facilitate the flow of information, solve problems as they rise, and exercise editorial judgment according to policy whenever necessary.

SLA Sci-Tech Division List.

To subscribe to the SLA-ST mailing list, send an E-mail message to LISTPROC@INDIGO.LIB.LSU.EDU Leave the subject line empty. In the body of the message, specify your full name the way you would want other subscribers to see it. Write only SUBSCRIBE SLA-ST First-name Last-name

To post a message to the list, send an E-mail message to SLA-ST@INDIGO.LIB.LSU.EDU

To learn about other available commands, send a message to LISTPROC@INDIGO.LIB.LSU.EDU

Leave the subject line empty. In the body of the message, write only HELP

SLA Engineering Division List

To subscribe to the SLA-ENG mailing list, send an E-mail to MAJORDOMO@IEE.ORG.UK Leave the subject line empty. Write only SUBSCRIBE SLA-ENG

To post a message to the list, send an E-mail message to SLA-ENG@IEE.ORG.UK

To learn about other available commands, send a message to MAJORDOMO@IEE.ORG.UK

Leave the subject line empty. In the body of the message, write only HELP

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