

IM, I Said



IF YOU AREN'T USING INSTANT MESSAGING, IT'S TIME to start. ■ IM, as it is universally known, is a very different beast than other forms of electronic communications.

IM is immediate, like a phone call, but it's also text, like e-mail. Also like e-mail, IM is amenable to multitasking. Unlike a telephone call, though, IM lets you politely interleave messages with other work, typing a few lines to a friend and then writing another paragraph on that annual report. You can even carry out multiple IM conversations at the same time, each in its own window. IM is a mixed blessing, but it's a tool that you're better off harnessing than ignoring.

People who don't use IM tend to dismiss it as the territory of gabby teenage girls. But grownups are flocking to this medium, too. A study this February by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 21 percent of IM users use it at work. This is not surprising: IM is dramatically more effective than e-mail for short, time-sensitive messages.

To use IM, you'll need an account with one of the IM providers—America Online is the most popular, followed by Yahoo! and MSN—and a piece of client software. AOL will try to get you to download its AIM software, but resist the temptation. The AOL program displays not only stock and news tickers but also advertisements—including occasional 15- or 30-second video segments, complete with sound that comes unbidden from your computer's speakers. Ick! You're better off with iChat on the Macintosh or the open-source Gaim—the GNU IM software for Windows and Linux machines. Businesses that care about the security of their messages can either set up their own IM servers or configure their IM users' software to use encryption.

Once you let IM into your life, you'll wonder how you did without it. I use IM to plan dinner with my wife, answer questions from students, and give my seven-year-old daughter a reason to learn how to type. It's great for messages that matter *now* but will be obsolete by the end of the day—or even after a few hours. I fre-

Smart companies want to control instant messaging but not destroy it, because IM is tremendously useful.

quently IM my editor to check the status of my various projects; it's the most effective way I know to get a quick answer out of a busy person.

Last spring, I found instant messaging particularly helpful in a class I was teaching. My students could check to see if I was online and, if so, just pop me a question. Some students would send me e-mail instead, but the perpetual clutter in my in-box meant that those students typically had to wait hours or even a day before they got an answer. By then, of course, the students had usually answered their questions through other channels—typically by IMing their friends.

IM can also be a huge time waster. Put a few dozen people on your "buddy list," and you'll always have someone who wants to chat—even when you'd rather not. AOL's software alerts you when your buddies log in and log out. Although it's tempting to drop friends a greeting whenever they appear, being on the receiving end of such attention gets annoying. If you don't learn restraint, you might find yourself blocked—that is, your IMs will be automatically rejected by friends who are tired of hearing from you. Of course, if

your IM buddies shut you down, you can always cruise websites like craigslist, which are filled with "I'm bored; please IM me!" messages from alleged 20-somethings.

Not surprisingly, this kind of unrestricted IM scares many parents—especially parents of 15-year-old girls eager to pass themselves off on Internet dating sites as 18. Some parents buy programs like ChatBlocker that promise to either block or record all of your IM chats on a particular computer. These programs can give you a false sense of security, though: your teenager can always chat using a friend's computer or a public Internet machine, or even a cell phone.

Parents aren't the only ones looking to control IM. FaceTime Communications markets a program for businesses, called IM Auditor, that will record IM between employees, limit who can IM whom, and automatically interrupt chats that stray into unacceptable subject areas. (The product's ostensible purpose is to help companies comply with federal regulations that define what information can be communicated over the Internet and what needs to be preserved for auditors.)

Smart companies want to control instant messaging but not destroy it, because IM is tremendously useful. For example, you can arrange for several people to participate in the same conversation, saving a lot of message relaying that undermines clear communications. My wife participates in an online writer's group; its members get together at a predetermined time once a month in a chat room and discuss each other's work. Trying to do this by e-mail, with its lack of immediate give-and-take, would produce very different results—or none at all.

That's why many educators say that it's better to teach your kids about the potential dangers of hooking up with strangers than to try to use technical means to restrict their communications in the first place. You might even teach them some good time management and IM etiquette while you're at it. In a future increasingly filled with instant-messaging opportunities, that's a skill that they—and you—will find vital. ■

Simson Garfinkel is an incurable gadgeteer, an entrepreneur, and the author of 12 books on information technology and its impact.