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Inbox is out as teens opt for IM Survey sends message: E-mail is for 'old people'

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For today's teenagers, e-mail is snail mail.

Teenagers are embracing instant messaging more than ever, preferring the communications software to slower, clunkier e-mail, says a study published Wednesday. "E-mail takes too long," said Star Fraga, 17, of Dallas. "Who wants to wait hours or days to get a response? Instant messaging is just that - instant."

Teens now reserve e-mail only for very specific uses, says the study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

It's good for communicating with a large group of people, such as a school club, or with adults or institutions, such as coaches and colleges.

Many teens say it's how they talk to "old people," not each other, researchers found. "E-mail is not the go-to conversation tool any longer," said Amanda Lenhart, a senior research specialist with the Pew project, which studies the way the Web affects society. "What teens are picking up is that in some ways, the e-mail medium is a longer, more involved form of communication. IM is what they use when they talk to friends. It feels to them much more like a conversation."

About 75 percent of teens with Internet access use IM software, said the study, which was based on a phone survey last fall of 1,100 U.S. children age 12 to 17 and their parents.

By comparison, about 42 percent of online adults use IM, the Pew study said.

E-mail is still more widespread, with 89 percent of online teens reporting that they've used it. But 46 percent of online teens said they use IM more frequently than e-mail and cellphone text messaging, compared with 33 percent who preferred e-mail over the other two forms of written communication.

The increasing IM activity presents new challenges for parents. Teenagers still have to get good grades and stay safe online.

"Parents of somebody that age can't imagine how they get homework done and have all these things going on around them," Ms. Lenhart said.

Ms. Lenhart and her fellow Pew researchers spent time with teens in focus groups as part of the study. Many of the young people staunchly defended their ability to handle IM and other tasks at the same time, she said.

"The teens will tell you they're pretty adept at doing that. That's the party line," she said. "It makes them feel efficient, like they can do more in less time, have more fun, watch more TV."

Hannah Hailey, for example, has 200 people on her buddy list and says she has no problem watching TV, surfing the Web and holding six or seven conversations at a time. "It just takes practice - it's actually not that hard," the 16-year-old Dallasite said. "It's not teaching us bad habits. It makes us better at communicating with people."

Many parents clamp down on their teenagers' Internet use. Star's mother, Martha Fraga, limits her daughter to one hour of non-school-related Internet use a day. So far, the rule has worked, Ms. Fraga said.

"Every parent is concerned about the chat groups, the predators, the viruses that can harm our computers!," she said. "Those are my main concerns, but the amount of time can sometimes be an issue, too. It hasn't gotten to be here, but it can be with other families." Some parents wonder how their teenagers' IM habits will translate when they enter the workforce.

"Maybe their brains are being wired a little differently than ours are to accommodate that behavior," said Steve Guengerich of Austin, whose son Ben, 15, is on IM about three hours each night.

As IM-loving teenagers get older, they'll have to convince their bosses they can do good work while they're chatting, technology experts say. That may be a tough sell.

"It's too early to tell how [teens'] multitasking abilities will carry over to work," said Tim Bjarin, president of electronics consulting group Creative Strategies, based in Campbell, Calif. "It could be a problem, viewing it from my older eyes. But logic says they could be in the meeting, surfing, doing e-mail, and actually be very good."

Employers had better prepare themselves for an IM-savvy workforce, said telecommunications analyst Jeff Kagan.

There are 80 million children in the Millennial Generation - those born after 1980 - and they are entering the workforce as baby boomers begin to retire.

The recruitment and retention of those highly sought workers will depend on how well technology is integrated into everyday tasks, Mr. Kagan said.

"As young people start taking leadership and management positions, companies will start taking these things seriously," he said. "Right now these are just toys to managers who run companies, but in a few years they will become the tools of the trade."

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