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Metro's IT Department Battles Onslaught of Junk E-Mail

- It's a tough balancing act separating bad from good e-mail; employees can help
- **Plus!** [Helpful Hints for Keeping the Junk Flow Low](#)

BY JIMMY STROUP

(March 8, 2006) Spam. Phishing. Spyware. Words like these might become more prevalent in the lexicon of employees' speech as Metro begins to make some changes in the way its e-mail is handled.

And just as the agency is taking some serious steps to stop the influx of junk e-mails into user accounts, employees, too, can help keep the amount of unwanted messages at low levels.

Information Technology Chief Information Officer Elizabeth Bennett says it's a tough balancing act to make sure actual e-mails are getting through the "filter" — a program that monitors incoming e-mails and determines if they're junk or not — but also that not too much junk makes it through into users' accounts.

Bennett and the IT team were getting complaints that users hadn't been receiving actual e-mails; that the filter had been too "tight" and that legitimate e-mail messages were being blocked. To allow the "good" e-mail to flow through, the filter was made less restrictive, even though the result would be that more junk e-mails also would get through.

"We opened [the filter] up a little bit to let more mail through, and what do you think happened?" Bennett said. "Of course, it's like a dam, right? Once you open it, even half an inch, water's going to get out and people are going to get wet. We had to open it up a little bit because it was catching too much other mail."

Keeping the junk flow low

Since Metro e-mail accounts aren't private, agency accounts are susceptible to getting more junk e-mail than a private account would be, Bennett says. Even so, there are some ways Metro employees can keep the flow of junk messages to a minimum.

More than just junk, Bennett said to be wary of "spam," which is e-mail from people trolling the Internet looking for ways to scam users out of their money or identity — commonly referred to as "phishing." If you don't watch to ensure e-mails are from legitimate sources, you may accidentally help Internet con artists steal from you.

Bennett said "spammers" generally disguise their e-mails to look as legitimate as possible, but they are discernable if you pay attention. She also said that the best thing to do is simply delete this kind of mail.

‘Steal your identity’

“If you weren’t alert to scams and you saw the word ‘VISA,’ you’d say, ‘Oh. VISA wants my information.’ So if you click on the link and type in everything they’re asking for, what have you just done? You have actually enabled them to steal your identity,” she said.

At Metro, since the filter has been set to allow more e-mail through users need to be vigilant about what they’re looking at, and about what they respond to. For its part, the agency is trying to make the tools it uses as effective as possible to catch junk and spam before it shows up in user accounts.

“Within two weeks, we’re going to do an upgrade on the software that filters the e-mail. What this upgrade is going to do is — hopefully — allow that software to be a little smarter in recognizing spam word patterns,” Bennett said.

By the end of the summer, IT hopes to roll out a bulk, or junk mail, folder and incorporate it into all Metro’s user accounts — as is found on a lot of commercial e-mail portal sites like yahoo.com or gmail.com.

Suspect e-mail will go into the junk folder, so you can still look at it, and the rest will be filtered out completely. The junk folder would be automatically deleted weekly or monthly, Bennett said.

Helpful Hints for Keeping the Junk Flow Low

- Don’t open an attachment unless you know who it’s from and you were expecting it.
- If you receive an e-mail message with an attachment from someone you don’t know, delete it immediately.
- If you need to send an e-mail attachment to someone, let them know you’ll be sending it so they don’t think it’s a virus.
- Don’t reply to messages with subject lines like: “Verify your account,” “If you don’t respond within 48 hours, your account will be closed,” “Dear Valued Customer,” and “Click the link below to gain access to your account.”

Courtesy of www.microsoft.com