Brian Clegg explains why today's communications software must try harder in the business world.

Let's get together

There's a common misapp-rehension that computers are for computation. You know, doing sums. Now, it's true that many people mess about with spreadsheets and fiddle the figures with PCs, but most of us spend our time instead on communication, information and entertainment.

For business, entertainment isn't particularly productive. I've nothing against games (in fact, I'm itching to get back to Star Wars: Rogue Squadron) and you'll certainly see them played in offices or, to be precise, you'll see them being hurriedly minimised! But they aren't what you could call a core business application. Information is different: good information is crucial to business, and I'll come back to that another time. But I'd like to concentrate now on communication. So much office business is just this. Making phone calls, sending emails and faxes, writing letters and holding meetings — communication is fundamental. Yet the software to support it is far from perfect.

Let's look at three types of product. They overlap in territory but the categories are useful. A contact manager like Symantec Act! is designed for the sort of scheduled contacts that fill the working life of a salesperson. It's very structured, but represents overkill for most office workers.

Then there are workgroup applications like Lotus Notes. These are great for sharing information to communicate throughout the company. But monsters like Notes are capable of using up much of the PC's resources, leaving little room for anything else. They can also be painfully slow to do something trivial like send an email, and they think that the rest of the world rotates around them, rather than realising they are but a humble utility.

There are the personal information managers like Microsoft Outlook. These make great diaries and address books but don't fully support communications. Outlook goes further than most by incorporating email and fax, but with lots missing.

The trouble is, while each product is okay in a niche, none of them fits the picture of an office worker's ideal communication tool. So here's my vapourware concept. Any software company is welcome to build it,

and all I expect in return is a credit and ten pence from each copy sold.

Firstly, you've got to pull together the commonly-used communications channels. This means emails, fax, telephone calls, pagers, meetings — not just schedules, but agendas, action points and more — short messaging to mobiles, writing letters... you name it. Of course, existing packages cover many of these but rarely to the right level. Take Outlook. I can initiate a phone call, but I can't schedule one, I can't tie-in to my caller ID to recognise who's ringing me, and I can't handle voicemail from a server nor a standalone modem.

I can write a letter, but the links to Word are infuriatingly dumb. Click 'new letter to contact' and it dumps you into the letter wizard: but I want to get on with writing a letter, not faff around choosing page designs. Equally, look up an address from inside Word using the Outlook address book and it fails to put the business name into the letter; a fault which has been present in at least three releases of Word. Small details? Yes, but small details make all the difference.

Secondly, you've got to be blisteringly fast. Speed is non-negotiable in modern communications. If it takes 30 seconds to address an email, you might as well give

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up now. Here, many products could learn from Outlook's facility which lets you just type a name like Bobby and have your usual meaning (Bobby Pickering) inserted with the option of changing to any other Bobby, using only two clicks.

Thirdly, great communications should be intuitive. There's no point having a super-fast application that takes months to learn. I've got redirection on my phone but I can't use it without digging out a sheet of codes. An ideal PC-based communications centre must be tested into the ground for usability. And you'd better make that independent testing, because software companies have the fault-blindness of a proud parent. So come on, how about it, developers? Is this too much to ask?

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