

How the communicator's dilemma made a 'slack-lash' inevitable



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Slack is a powerful communication tool and one of the most celebrated tech companies of the past couple of years with 2.7 million daily users and a \$3.8 billion valuation. So it has been interesting to witness the so-called "Slacklash" -- a small but rising tide of exhausted users vowing not to use the service again.

Where once the messaging platform was called, there is now chronicling the backlash, The Atlantic has and, of course, there is a hashtag to capture .

Why is a tool with so much promise and enthusiasm being turned on so quickly by an increasing segment of its early adopters? Sure, it may just be but a major reason in my estimation is the inevitable ineffectiveness of communication platforms -- what I call The Communicator's Dilemma.

The who and what of communication

Regardless of the medium, communication between humans has two main dimensions:

1. Who are you communicating with
2. What are you communicating about.

Each of these dimensions runs along a spectrum:

- From your close friends and colleagues to anyone in the world (who)
- From specific to general topics (what), as depicted in the below graph.

All new communication platforms start in quadrant A. Life is great in A. You feel so efficient. You're communicating with people you know on topics you care about, with few distractions. Time-wasting tools, like email, that occupy quadrant D seem like relics of the less-productive past. "I'm getting so much done," you declare, "I'll never use email again!"

But it's very difficult to stay in quadrant A. Users inevitably expand the spectrum of the efficient new medium to more friends and colleagues, while discussing broader topics. The platform vendor will obviously encourage this expanded usage and engagement as part of its growth strategy. But as soon as this happens, the utility of the platform tips from communication to distraction. The Communicator's Dilemma strikes again.

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Don't blame the tools.

Slack is the latest shiny new platform to go through that maturation, but hardly the only one. Facebook is a great way to stay in touch with friends, but it also inundates you with distant relatives cluttering your feed with their crazy cats. LinkedIn started as a powerful way to build your professional network, but is increasingly a platform for sales pitches and "inspirational quotes" -- the workplace equivalent of cat photos.

In all these cases, the tool is not necessarily the problem. As a messaging service, Slack is excellent with great features like channels that, in theory, should make people more productive. But because Slack can be used to communicate about anything, it's hard for users to intuitively grasp how to employ it most effectively. As a result, channels become overloaded leading to a torrent of notifications and messages that users can't keep up with.

Jason Fried, the founder and CEO of project management app Basecamp, authored an of Slack and similar group chat services. He particularly dislikes how such near-synchronous messaging services:

- Expect people to be " always on" and available any time
- Have a short-and-fast format that discourages thoughtful feedback
- Typically lack context of what's being discussed -- particularly for visual work

Slack was supposed to be a more productive alternative to our overloaded inboxes, yet is starting to provoke similar levels of resentment among users as email. Ultimately it comes back to the Communicator's Dilemma. Any replacement for email that aspires to occupy Quadrant D will inevitably assume many of the problems associated with email.

Vertical communications are on the up.

It may not be fashionable to say it, but email . Most of us want and need a horizontal communication tool where anyone can contact us about any subject, we just don't need too many of them dividing our attention.

The solution to The Communicator's Dilemma is not to add more horizontal platforms like email or Slack but instead to supplement them with vertical services that have a clearly defined purpose, like how engineers discuss software development in Github.

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A product like Github is purpose-built for discussions around specific projects and cat pics from distant relatives are not welcome. Because the communication they facilitate is always in-context and relevant to the whole team, everyone feels in-the-loop without being over-whelmed and discussion is more effective.

Function-specific tools allow people to actively choose to go in and get work done then get out when they're finished. They avoid the inefficient context switching of an inbox full of messages, while easing the burden on Quadrant D tools by having task-specific conversations in a more effective place.

So instead of a Slacklash leading to people abandoning a perfectly good messaging tool, why not integrate it with those other services different departments already use to work together. The trend starts here.