

Just as the typewriter trumped the methods of communication before it, the computer is bringing sweeping changes almost daily to our fast-track lifestyle.

We live in a society where everything is instant, and getting faster, so it should come as no surprise that legislators are among the millions of people who have embraced technology — particularly e-mail — to help them run an efficient office.

Sen. Jon Erpenbach of Wisconsin is among those who rely on e-mail to communicate with the people he represents.

“We’re getting more and more (e-mails) every day, which is good,” he said. “I usually respond personally to each one — I’m very much an Internet junkie.”

E-mail hasn’t replaced the telephone in his office or in those of fellow Wisconsin legislators, Erpenbach said. Snail mail is still essential, although Erpenbach said he finds himself fascinated with the concept behind the faster means of communication.

“I’m at my computer and online pretty much all the time,” he said.

As chairman of the Senate Committee on Privacy, Electronic Commerce and Financial Institutions, Erpenbach has introduced an initiative to encourage the growth of high-speed Internet service across Wisconsin.

Erpenbach said e-mail has assisted him in doing his work, although it can never replace getting out of the office and meeting people in person to discuss specific issues.

“One of the things that legislators need to be aware of is, don’t forget to talk to people,” Erpenbach said.

E-mail is so common in today’s fast-paced world that those accustomed to it can’t seem to live without it.

There’s good e-mail, bad e-mail, junk e-mail and plenty of it.

Kentucky House Speaker Jody Richards said he receives an abun-

Instant messaging

dance of electronic correspondence.

“The use of e-mail certainly is making it easier to talk with more of my constituents, especially those who do not hesitate to contact me via the Internet to air their views,” Richards said. “This trend will undoubtedly continue, of course, but I don’t think it will overtake traditional letters, the telephone, or preferably meeting in person.”

Richards said he relies on his office staff to assist with most correspondence, although he said he periodically reviews letters with staff members or at his home to decide the best way to respond.

“It’s difficult to quantify how much time is spent on e-mail alone, since I don’t separate them out,” said Richards, who added that his staff prioritizes the letters to which he responds.

The amount of time it takes to respond to an e-mail can vary, Richards said.

“Depending on the nature of the e-mail, it could be almost immediately or up to several weeks,” he said. “If the e-mail just conveys the sender’s views on a particular issue, especially when the General Assembly is in session, we may wait longer.”

To avoid unnecessary delays, Richards said his office is working to develop a system that ensures every e-mail sender receives a response as quickly as possible.

During a General Assembly session, Richards said he receives an average of 15 e-mails daily. That number drops by two-thirds when the Legislature is not in session.

Rep. Robert Farr of Connecticut said some people are blanketing many legislators at once with bulk mail.

“The problem is most messages don’t have an address,” Farr said. ★

Legislators are increasingly using e-mail to communicate with constituents.

BY KEVIN KINNAIRD

Kevin Kinnaird is Web page editor for The Council of State Governments.