

The Attachments to Links Project

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The UN Secretariat maintains a server dedicated to the use of the permanent and observer missions to UNHQ. This server hosts web sites for the missions and also is an email post office for them. Each of the roughly 200 missions has an official email account and usually several others. The server is on the Internet and is available via dialup to the missions.

The Treaty Depository Office at UNHQ distributes circular notifications (CNs) via email to each mission. Often one or more are sent each day. The actual CNs are provided as attachments in English and French versions to the email. The email system in use creates a copy for each official mission account. This often results in full mailboxes for the missions and is a substantial load on the server.

The Informatics Working Group (IWG) is an ECOSOC body that functions as a user's group for the missions, in addition to other duties. I am the Secretariat's representative to the IWG and it provides governance for the mission email function.

It seemed a simple solution to stop sending attachments and instead just provide links to the official documents on the UN Treaty website. This would reduce the size of emails by 2 orders of magnitude, effectively eliminating the email overload being experienced.

However, a succession of barriers has appeared to slow down the implementation of this solution:

- Many delegates, despite their membership in the IWG, are so unfamiliar with information technology, that they feel uncomfortable endorsing a technical decision that involves a change in process. Their missions also lack technical expertise and cannot help.

- Because a change in process is involved, regardless of how trivial, that touches legal documents of significance, the legal affairs officers of the missions have become part of the review process for this technical solution.
- The Secretariat is also resistant to change. The Treaty Depository Office has interpreted its mandate for distribution of CNs in a particular way and is loathe to change any process without recalling its mandate and reinterpreting it in consultation with the Governing Bodies.

Caught in this web, the Secretariat sought and received the approval to proceed with a pilot project, immediately implemented, wherein the emails are sent with both links and attachments. The missions and the Treaty Depository Office were happy with this interim solution in which they risked nothing and were given time to consider the change.

Some observations and thoughts from this “trivial” project:

- The profound and wide-spread ignorance of information technology makes it extremely difficult to get informed consent from users and decision-makers on IT issues.
- Resistance to change is not only a factor to address for the direct beneficiaries of an IT project but is present for the service providers as well.
- Delivering a technical solution is easy; achieving real success is difficult because it requires human change.

In part as a response to this experience, we have increased the training opportunities for delegates in information technology. We have also started to create informative and detailed guides to IT services for the missions.

We have further potential plans for the missions:

- We could establish and manage a high-speed network for the missions in New York; doing so would allow us to provide them with consistent service and support.
- Using such a network, we could leverage a large, ongoing Secretariat initiative addressing the automation of multi-lingual documents and provide reliable print-on-demand directly in the missions as well as at UNHQ.
- The mission network could be securely extended to the wireless realm, particularly in conjunction with the pending expansion and reconstruction of UNHQ.

However, we caution ourselves that, as in the case of changing attachments to links, even though we can easily envision the technical solution, the human factors involved in these potential changes are the critical elements.

Hence, any complete solutions will fully address the initial and continuing education and support, for all the impacted communities, that will be necessary for real success.

Addressing the four basic questions in the social sciences, as requested:

1. The attachments to links project is an ongoing case of attempting to introduce change into a group of users and service providers in a way that is grounded in their informed consent.
2. This case was chosen because it is so simple and crystallizes the issues.
3. It happened as described in the preceding paragraphs.
4. We were originally thinking this was a technical issue; the missions generally could not comprehend the issue technically and made it a political issue; the Treaty Depository Office likewise deals with it politically.

A final set of observations/questions: are we “right” to push our technical solutions? Who decides? Is it “good” to train the ever-changing mission staff in information technology – will they become better decision makers with regard to IT as a result, both presently for their missions and later in other public or private positions?