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Brent R. Petersen, “Letters to the Managing Editor: Alleviating Unsolicited Commercial Email,” *IEEE Canadian Review*, Issue #45, p. 5, Fall 2003.

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Alleviating Unsolicited Commercial Email

At the IEEE Sections Congress in October 2002, www.ieee.org/sc/, one of the many recommendations for action included dealing with unsolicited email messages sent to IEEE email aliases. At that time, the IEEE IT staff started looking for a system using appropriate software and hardware. They started their search by studying the method used by the University of New Brunswick, www.unb.ca. As it turned out, this method formed the basis of the approach used by the IEEE. However, the IEEE had to expand the system to deal with about ten times the number of email messages, international laws, and additional functionality.



Internal trials of the system by the staff were favorable and an initial version of the system is scheduled to be launched on an opt-in basis in November 2003.

One aspect of the system is that it can be configured via a Web interface in order that email which is likely unsolicited is flagged, but not discarded. The user selects the method of flagging using the "Subject" email header. Subsequently, it is easy for the recipient to search for the flag and to deal with that likely unsolicited email in any chosen manner. One manner is to have the user's email software filter search for the flag and save the email in a file or folder. The user may look at the emails once in a while, in case a legitimate email was inadvertently flagged. Another manner is to discard unconditionally, known as blocking, the flagged email. Finally, the system could be configured to do nothing at all.

An enhancement being considered by the IEEE is to allow the end-user to control how or which emails should be allowed and disallowed for delivery. This enhancement also allows the end user to control the sensitivity thresholds associated with the inspection and filtering of unsolicited email. The end-user will be able to view up to 8 kbytes per message of the email that the system considers to be unsolicited email in order to determine whether or not the message can be delivered. No implementation dates are available yet for this enhancement.

There is no solution for unsolicited email, only strategies to minimize it. However, it is better to let the staff be the experts in minimizing it. This system will save time for IEEE email alias users because most unsolicited email will no longer clog their "Inbox" and because users will not have to waste time finding their own strategies to deal with the problem. Furthermore, these strategies are constantly changing.

The author finds significant utility in having a lifetime email address with the IEEE. However, the prospect of getting large amounts of unsolicited email for life was not pleasing, a situation which will soon be improved.

On a personal note, I know someone who works solely in the business world who I think would become an associate member of the IEEE in order to have access to the IEEE's world-class email system with daily updated virus scanning and unsolicited-email flagging. Furthermore, this person's business associates may not necessarily know about the use of this system because the person's lifetime MBA email alias would get forwarded to the IEEE email alias and then to a destination account. However, if an email containing a virus was sent to the MBA email alias and then automatically re-directed to the IEEE email alias, the IEEE email system would delete the virus and email a brief report to the email's originator. People may apply on-line for associate grade membership in the IEEE at www.ieee.org/join/, in order to obtain access to the email system capabilities of the world's largest technical professional society.

The IEEE staff did a great job of bringing this system, in one year, from concept to production.

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