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CUSP (CU I&E) Submission: Using "Slack" for Team Communication [1]

Description

In any large organization, the volume of email communication very easily becomes overwhelming. Email is great and wonderful, but it's not good at everything, yet it's often used for just about every kind of communication: from simple requests to large multi-person conversations, to announcements and newsletters --- it's often hard to quickly determine what is important and what isn't, and sometimes important things get lost in the shuffle.

Slack is a team chat platform that emphasizes open channels and groups for the power of real-time text chat with searchable archives, 3rd party integrations, and easy sharing of files and documents. Slack is REALLY GOOD at things that email isn't: pulling others into a conversation WITH the context, increasing overall awareness in an organization about what is happening and what is being discussed, and connecting people at their point of need. Using Slack, we've been able to cut down the amount of email to primarily inter-departmental conversations, while leaving simple questions, brainstorming sessions, and all sorts of other interactive coordinating kinds of communication to Slack. Slack is our space to work internally as a team while email remains invaluable as our interface with the rest of the university.

An important point to stress: Slack is more about changing the culture of communication on our team than about the particulars of the technology. It enables us to speak and collaborate in more effective ways by influencing our behavior. Slack is much more than a simple instant messaging app like Lync or Jabber.

It's not necessarily as easy to explain in text as to SHOW it, so check out what Slack is here: http://slack.com [2]

How does this impact the University?

Anything that slows down or confuses communication in the University has an impact on our students and on the effectiveness of our mission. Sometimes even just an extra hour or day to respond to a faculty member's question, or an extra week finishing up an important report, paper, or presentation while waiting on an email reply or trying to track down a document --- it has a real world impact. Slack helps us move more quickly by connecting us in new ways as a team.

Specifically, Slack helps us solve problems quickly. If one team member has a question, they can reach out to the wider group and whoever is available or knows the answer can respond quickly --- no need to wait for an email forward or a phone call or schedule a meeting. It helps us be more nimble and responsive. Since email is full of EVERYTHING an important question

is often lost in the shuffle, but in Slack you can @mention people and a group for the really important stuff, and separate out the less important things into other channels. Again: it's harder to explain in words, but in practice it's a really powerful concept of communication.

Adopting Slack has meant that in general we have become more effective and more coherent as a team --- we know what each other is working on, how we are progressing, and who can help with what. The air just feels cleaner compared to an email-only environment where you can be inundated with an overwhelming stream.

Implementation Status

CU Online piloted Slack in Fall 2014. We have had such an enthusiastic response that we are now slowly rolling it out one team at a time within the greater OIT. To date CU Online has been joined by the OIT Help Desk and the Identity Management teams, with more teams soon to follow. We are doing it carefully and deliberately, rather than just flipping a switch on the whole organization, because Slack represents a cultural change in communication as a team and as an organization: it's not just about logins and apps and installations.

As such, we are moving well beyond the pilot phase and growing use of Slack in our organization, and we are excited at the benefits to our effectiveness and culture as we continue implementing.

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