

# IBM designs a new chapter, with Verse

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First unveiled at January's Connect conference under its developmental codename 'Mail Next,' IBM Verse recently made its formal debut. The email product is the first from IBM Design studios. Clearly, IBM is making a serious attempt to shed its conservative, risk-averse attitude toward product design. The company has historically invested heavily in both market research and R&D, but it lacked the confidence in its convictions at times to take the results to market ahead of the wave. With Verse, IBM is not looking simply to present a better way of using email, but is offering a grander vision: 'a new way to work.' IBM recognizes that the productivity brake isn't simply the notion of the 'in-box' and how it works, but that the in-box no longer holds the primary role for messaging, collaboration and communication that it once did. In taking a radically different and rather non-IBM approach to thinking about work, IBM's ambitions could be matched by what it is bringing to market.

## The 451 Take

IBM has at times lacked a key ingredient for entrepreneurship: a willingness to try things and sometimes get it wrong. With Verse, IBM is showing signs that it is able to reinvent itself by taking a radically different approach to product design and attempting to redesign the most familiar of working tools - email. Verse is likely to be one of the key prisms through which IBM parades its new identity as a business applications provider. IBM's openness in suggesting that it is now centered primarily upon work (and social working processes), rather than technology for its own sake, is refreshing and to be congratulated. Nevertheless, it will need to continue to invest in Verse, not least to articulate how that radicalism shifts the role of email - and messaging in general - beyond an unloved symptom of work to become a place where work is happily and successfully concluded.

## **Context**

Established in 2012, IBM Design is based in Austin, Texas, with additional offices in the UK, Ireland, Germany and China. It employs roughly 400 people, and in just over two years, it has trained 220 designers fresh from university as part of this dedicated design workforce, allowing the greater IBM organization to take advantage of this skillset within product development cycles. Before IBM Design's inception, the ratio of designers to engineers within product development was 1:70; now the ratio is 1:15, and design is having a greater impact on the way in which IBM is going about developing products.

The first of the products that has undergone this new process via IBM Design is the IBM Connections email client Verse (via its codename 'Mail Next'). Verse was formally announced in November with an initial extended beta program for selected customers running toward general availability in March 2015. In the intervening period, Verse will also be available for individuals on a 'freemium' basis via IBM's Cloud Marketplace starting in early 2015.

## **Strategy**

As we discussed in August, IBM had a strong claim on the notion of 'smarter working' back in 2007 with the launch of Lotus Connections, a platform that slowly evolved to encompass many of the familiar pieces of contemporary productivity suites. But continuing to develop this platform on a 'feature-function' basis was no longer adequate for IBM's ambitions, so following a reported \$100m investment in IBM Design since its 2012 launch, Connections has been undergoing a thorough overhaul to better represent the way in which workplace tasks are being conducted.

The crux of the approach driven by IBM Design and visualized in Verse is 'user centric design' - not thinking about the tasks that need to be completed, but thinking instead about the motivations of the workforce completing them. This design process is not unique to IBM by any means - although it is new to the company - but it is targeted toward how something will be used rather than what it is. For example, in Verse, 'owed and owing' tasks are placed in a primary position within the user interface. This gives users a quick view on the sets of emails and suggests which work should be prioritized and which colleagues should be contacted first based on actions/work that the user owes or is owed.

IBM points out that it believes this approach should always be work-focused, and that the same sort of client for home/consumer tasks would result in a radically different set of design imperatives. Phil Gilbert, who heads IBM Design, suggests that in order for a product such as Verse to provide the

smarter working environment that enterprises require, it needs to understand the processes and dependencies that exist within the emails. For Gilbert, the number of emails that are 'unread' isn't particularly important; however, whether the information within those unread messages is relevant to the 'owed and owing' process is vital. In time, IBM anticipates that the role of providing that insight into messages surfaced in Verse will fall to IBM's Watson cognitive computing technology; for now, that remains in an unspecified place on the product's roadmap.

IBM envisages Verse's role not only to be the primary email messaging platform, but also to provide a collaborative workspace supported by other elements of Connections, such as the Sametime communications tool. Some of IBM Design's research suggests that a traditional in-box isn't so much full of messages as it is full of people. The communications between people in the context of shared tasks/projects – which gave rise to that 'owed and owing' task prioritization paradigm – means that the ability to support multiple messaging platforms (both IBM's and those provided by third parties) is vital. The company's recent tie-up with Twitter is one such example of a third party, perhaps with half an eye toward revisiting some form of 'unified communications.'

## **Competition**

The fact that both Microsoft and Google have recently made announcements around productivity suite email products suggests that both are using this most familiar piece of software to demonstrate what they believe the next generation of workplace tools will look like. IBM's comment about designing for work rather than consumers is most likely a covert dig at Google, which has also been rethinking the way in which the email in-box works and has come up with its 'Google Inbox' beta product. Google Inbox extends the subject clustering present as category tabs within the existing Gmail product and introduces the ability to 'pin' email threads, as well as a form of muting, called 'Snooze,' where a thread can be resurfaced at a user-specified date and time.

Microsoft, with its Office platform predominate within enterprises, has been experimenting with its 'Clutter' interface, which will soon roll out as an opt-in extra for users of its cloud-based Office 365 platform. Clutter is designed to prioritize emails based upon a period of learning; as users add specific messages to a specified 'clutter' folder, other inbound messages with similar characteristics will be treated accordingly.

However, if Google and Microsoft are the two key named competitors, it's also worth noting that an army of startups has been yelling from the rooftops for the last few years that 'email is dead.' Clearly, email is not dead, but that noise has dampened enthusiasm and interest in looking for innovation in the email space and will block some of IBM's efforts here.

## SWOT Analysis

### Strengths

IBM's significant investment both in IBM Design and Verse suggests that it is placing great confidence in its ability to reinvent itself ahead of the competition. IBM is a long-standing investor in research across the board with a newly acquired confidence to execute on that research; its next product iterations should be closely watched for that 'user centric' approach.

### Opportunities

IBM's primary task is to sell Verse's qualities to its installed base, reigniting the enthusiasm of those that have remained loyal (or static) with its Lotus Domino platform.

### Weaknesses

IBM is playing a big battle of catch-up; its email business on which – for the time being, at least – it is dependent has retained market share largely due to the complexity and expense of moving from it.

### Threats

IBM is attempting to take the traditional idea of an email client in an entirely different direction – toward a task-based approach. However sensible this is from a working perspective, IBM faces a difficult challenge in articulating this to the marketplace. Selling based upon features and functions (such as thread muting) might be pragmatic, but undersells Verse's real potential.

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