

Azam: its history and philosophy

(Some personal experiences from Andronicos)

Why Azam was developed

I worked for years with a rich mix of communication tools - emails, voice-mails, conference and satellite phones - and, like everyone else, struggled to balance my desire to listen to others with constant pressure on my time. To help resolve this conflict, Azam was created: a tool allowing people to work at those times which suit them, enabling them to talk or listen to others via email, and to store important parts of conversations so as to retain valuable ideas.

This is the story behind Azam:

In 1998, I was losing sleep. Living in California - eight hours behind the UK, nine hours behind Milan and Dusseldorf - I tumbled out of bed at unearthly hours to join meetings with European colleagues. In the grand scheme of things it was not a huge problem, but I found it extremely irritating. My cunning plan was to send faxes or emails instead, but it takes me half an hour to type just two minutes' worth of speech, my handwriting is illegible and my spelling poor; I'm partially dyslexic.

I came up with the idea, and I certainly do not claim to be the first, of using voice emails. It was an unoriginal but effective approach. No typing or scrawling, my words were passed from colleague to colleague, office to office with their meaning intact. The nuances and expression came, so to speak, straight from the horse's mouth rather than via the horse's keyboard or fax machine. The downside was that everyone received a monologue, a set piece to be listened to without pause from beginning to end.

Over time I had further requirements for this little voice email tool. You've probably read the adverts proclaiming that "accurate, timely information is money". Well, I wanted our offices in Europe to record their crucial meetings and to share their discussions online with others and myself. It wasn't that I wanted to be Big Brother; I simply wished to hear what led to a recommendation, to get first hand the range and strength of feeling across the company and have access to that knowledge instantly. Formal reports would not meet any of the criteria. Moreover, I didn't always need to hear the whole meeting as parts of it were normally enough. Neither did my colleagues desire lengthy recordings; they wanted only the nuts and bolts, the pithy bits. To make this possible, and to save others having to listen to my frequent messages in their entirety, we introduced the editing functions of Azam.

As the idea for Azam was developed further, I asked if it was possible to record, edit and store phone calls on my PC, so that I could participate both in one-to-one calls and one-to-many conference calls via my computer. It was possible. Yes, I know it still meant that I had to get out of bed early, but that's life I suppose. Azam#1 was born.

I still wanted more; I was aware of time pressures, trying to balance so many aspects of life. Azam had to be more time-effective. I wanted to be able to go straight to the relevant sections of the recording before they were emailed, edited or stored: a fast tracking system was required. 'WordNet', a neat tool developed at Princeton University, helped us to achieve this goal. Once introduced, Azam could search for key words in the recording, **automatically identifying similar or connected words**¹. If you are a Customs Official retrieving discussions over the last three years on rabid dogs, the software will find the details on Fifi the sick poodle!

I had another, personal, use for such a product: romance. I am an expert on romance, in the sense that I have been divorced twice and am currently searching for my future ex-wife across five continents. A "Romantic Template" is included in the product for my benefit.

Oh, and I had one more requirement for this product: I enjoy playing practical jokes, but our publicist suggested I don't write about this yet. (David is a very able advisor but quite conservative in nature. I gave in - under protest - to his strong recommendation not to name Azam using the well-known Greek/Danish word FETA.)

¹ Available in the boxed version of Azam only.

A tremendous amount of research has gone into this version of Azam. An international team of professionals with years of experience in cutting-edge software design has helped to create and mould this product. The findings of psychologists, futurists and lawyers have all been incorporated. We asked for input from teenagers, children and employers across the spectrum of the business community. We have tried to take on board the needs of the disabled, elderly, dyslexic and “computer afraid” and continue to seek their advice.

This is how the seeds of Azam were sown. Hopefully it is now a tool that will help many to communicate with greater ease. If it brings enjoyment and helps you to avoid *one* major misunderstanding then it has all been worth it.

Have fun using Azam: don't just say it - Azam it!

A personal note

I started in the computer industry in 1975, and since 1984 have worked designing software programs, consulting and teaching technicians and managers in all areas of Enterprise Systems Management. The simplest explanation of this type of management is that it should minimise the *risk* of change and the *impact* of problems. A fundamental rule in life is that problems may bring about change and change may cause problems (getting out of bed early was my problem).

Building helpdesks for multinationals, automating how they collected, escalated and managed problems while implementing change, were amongst my greatest challenges. Key lessons were learned in this period. Misunderstandings, whether in business or personal life, are expensive both emotionally and financially. I know what it means to be "misheard", and appreciate the impact of having one's actions misinterpreted. Yet wrongly- interpreted messages are all too familiar. Azam is geared towards opening up communications at a level that we understand best - the spoken word.

I have observed that tremendous time and effort is spent keeping "in touch" and avoiding misunderstandings. We write and copy copious notes, make numerous telephone calls and send confirming emails. Nevertheless, despite best intentions and hours of dedicated administration, communications are misinterpreted and confusion reigns. I can illustrate this dilemma with an example: Louise, a senior advisor I knew at a customer site, was acknowledged for her efficient record-keeping. Her meetings were minuted and distributed, essential in her field as she was a financial specialist. Her conscientiousness meant that she worked late and struggled to keep up with the schedules. Following a key meeting, Louise, as normal, distributed a detailed account of the agreements. She also made numerous offline telephone conversations, clarifying and outlining action on several points. These discussions were passed on, and in the "telling" became summarised and distorted. Mistakes were made and misunderstandings arose, scuppering the introduction of a much-needed product.

Louise had not the time or the inclination to clarify and outline everything in writing. Had Azam been used, her words would have been recorded automatically, passed on to her colleagues across the company and stored online for review. No extra effort on Louise's part would have been required. There would have been no distortion. Such misunderstandings are not unusual or limited to business. I am sure that we all have a similar personal story to tell.

It was to avoid situations like these that I invented Azam. By recording our words directly, we preserve the original intent of our communication: our emotion and tone remains along with the detail of our message. With Azam, there will be no unintentional distortion as our words pass from person to person. We do not have to worry that messages passed down the line will have key information missing. The last person in the corridor will hear our message exactly as we meant it to be heard.

Email is fast, flexible and easy to use, but it takes away our *voice*, our emotion and character. Azam gives us back our voice and keeps the much-valued benefits of emails; the ability to edit, paste, store, file and share.

With this product I hope to use the email technology that we already have, and which we are comfortable using, in order to create a new form of online communication. Azam works *with* us and with our words, removing the time-consuming need to transcribe them; it simply fits into our day. Azam helps avoid misunderstandings.

The Sense of recording conversations

Today, the concept of recording an important discussion or message can cause some to raise their eyebrows. This is understandable. I can remember my very first job, in the computer department of one of Europe's largest banks. It was 1975 and we had two huge 4-megabyte mainframe computers, with various other devices, in an area the size of a football pitch. These two monoliths were fed by banks of dismountable disk drives, each one the size of a camper van and holding 1 gigabyte of data. Even in the year 2002 any PC that had less than 256 meg of memory and 10 gig of hard disk would have been considered old technology. As a young computer technician I had to attend a review meeting and was rather taken aback to discover that it was going to be minuted. I questioned whether the team trusted each other but kept quiet (for the whole meeting) and accepted this "new" approach.

I wonder if the person who invented the concept of taking minutes ever had to do a sales job persuading his contemporaries to speak. Mind you, we are probably talking about a group of priests somewhere in Mesopotamia 5000 years ago who, if they got "it" wrong, ended up in the crocodile pit. Things are rather different today, even in the cutthroat world of business politics. But, if by some small chance it exists, perhaps Azam can help you to escape the corporate crocodile pit by avoiding the odd misunderstanding!

I am confident that once this becomes a routine method of alternative communication, Azam users will wonder why they never used it before.

Remote mediation and conflict resolution

I recently attended an excellent course at the School of Psychotherapy and Counselling in London (I was there as a student, not an inmate) on the subject of mediation. I wanted to learn how Azam could help resolve disputes through remote mediation. After all, not everyone can afford the cost of, or feels comfortable with sitting in front of a mediator, arguing their case with the other protagonist: some people need a little more space!

Research is taking place as I write on the viability of using remote mediation for basic disputes and relationship counselling. The press will be briefed at the appropriate time with the findings.

For now Azam includes a simple template to facilitate dispute resolution. Try using Azam to record each side of a disagreement between two people and send it to a mutually-respected third party for resolution. Try it on the kids and use an older child to act as mediator. It can work and actually teach social skills at the same time.

Finally, speaking from personal experience, sending an Azam message to heal a rift or prolonged family dispute can be surprisingly effective. Without going into detail about how it helped me, I can assure you - it works.

Please email me your experiences. We'll publish the best ones - with total anonymity of course.

Azam and the disabled

I am blessed with four lovely children that I adore with an equal amount of love. But my first child, Kristian, is special. Born in 1977 with mental and physical disabilities, the doctors gave my wife and I very little hope that he would live to his second birthday. Even if he did, there was an overwhelming chance that he would end up severely disabled. He is now 25 (in 2003), one of the most loving people you could ever wish to meet, with incredible savant qualities.

It would be wrong and rather tacky to imply that Azam was built with Kristian in mind - it wasn't - but people like Kristian can benefit from its ease of use.

What I am very pleased to be able to tell you is that to begin with, Azam will be given free to every disabled person in the UK who could benefit from the technology.

I would like your suggestions on how to improve Azam for use by the disabled. Funds permitting, we aim to give free Azam software to the disabled in the whole of the EU and the English-speaking world as soon as possible. The plan is for foreign versions of the product to be available within two years.

If you are part of an organisation working with disabled customers, visit the AzamIT web-site for more information on how to take part in this initiative.

Guidelines on Azam Etiquette

As the inventor of Azam, I was asked to create some guidelines on Azam etiquette which incorporate the philosophy of Azam's development. They are intended as recommendations to help ensure your enjoyment of the product, and not as *personal* guidelines.

- Guideline 1 **Important Legal Note** - If you record someone without his or her permission, you may be committing a criminal offence. This depends on your country or state. If in doubt, seek competent legal advice.
- Guideline 2 **Important ethical consideration** - It is courteous to advise people that their voices are being recorded. The day you inform someone that they were recorded without their consent, even if no law was broken or it was done as a prank, it is very likely that that person will never trust you again. Worse still, if that person is your spouse, they may file for divorce. There are exceptions to this rule of course, but it's for you to decide. It is, of course, not for me to give you or your organisation moral guidelines. Personally, there have been a few occasions where I have legally recorded third parties without their consent.
- Guideline 3 Emailing Azam recordings on an ordinary Internet connection takes approximately 1 minute download time per 1 minute of talk time. High-speed internet connections at both ends are recommended for frequent Azam email users. In my opinion, it is bad manners to send lengthy Azam recordings to someone without prior agreement.
- Guideline 4 All ISPs and companies set a maximum email size for attachments or storage on mail servers. Check the limits at both ends.

- Guideline 5 Please respect participants of meetings who do not wish to be recorded. We all have hang-ups. I know I do ever since the day I looked into a mirror and saw no reflection (someone had removed the mirror part and left the frame). I suggest the pause button be used when these people speak; this is the best way to say something "strictly off the record" anyway.
- Guideline 6 If more than one person is using an Azam recording function, the verbal consent of each participant should be ensured. A simple repeated statement at the start of the meeting is sufficient: "This is Lucy, I consent to this conversation being Azam'd." "This is John, I agree with Lucy"... etc. It is good manners to do so, provides a reference in case speakers' voices are subsequently unrecognisable (Lucy may have had a cold that day or Lee, your chief software whizzkid, may not have reached puberty yet) and, more importantly, it may be the law in your part of the world.
- It would be nice if Azam was pronounced properly, whichever language you are speaking. Say "Ay-Zam". Azam is a software product to aid effective and efficient communication. Let's not get it confused with ASSAM tea.
- Guideline 7 If your company makes use of opt-in email enquiries and wish to use Azam as a communication tool, I suggest you keep the initial "cold call" recorded message to a one-minute maximum.
- Guideline 8 My motto is "Avoid misunderstandings - don't breed them." There's nothing wrong with assertive communication, but please remember there are limits to what is considered decent and legal.

Guideline 9 If you are a mail administrator, please update your mail configuration to allow Azam attachments to be sent and received.

Azam recordings are in non-executable code. This means that computer viruses cannot be passed on from Azam voice files. Many companies filter emails received from external parties and automatically reject certain types of attachments.

Guideline 10 By ensuring only authorised versions of Azam are installed, more money will be available to develop future versions of the product, for technical support, and for the future of free Azam for the disabled world-wide

If you feel you would like to propose new guidelines for Azam etiquette and procedures, please email me via the website. I wish to reiterate the statement in the introduction above, but in different words: these are guidelines not rules. How you use Azam is, of course, up to you.

Conclusion

You've now read why Azam was developed and how it evolved, based initially on my personal requirement for a simple tool to communicate so that I didn't have to get out of bed early in the morning in California. I felt quite honoured a few months ago when external advisors recommended it be named "Andronicos Z's Avoiding Misunderstandings", or Azam for short. My initial choice for a name was Feta.

We've been dedicated to creating a tool that can be used by the majority of people, strikes a balance between capability and usability, and is entertaining.

If you, your colleagues at work, management, family members and friends intend to use Azam on a regular basis (whether for work or for fun), you will look back and wonder how you managed before it existed.

On a final note, if Azam eventually contributes to preventing 0.00121212% of misunderstandings in the world, while improving the quality of life for those less fortunate in society, then it's all been worth it.

Don't just say it - Azam it!

Andronicos

(Refer to Andronicos' hints and tips on using Azam in the online Help Tutorials.)