lower than manual means of exchanging information. In fact, the use of EDI has saved many industries millions of dollars over time. The source of such savings will be discussed later.

Before reading further about what EDI *is*, it is important to clarify what EDI is *not*. It is not electronic mail or *e-mail*. E-mail services which are widely available, are used very differently from EDI services. The key difference is document structure. When one uses an E-mail system, one simply sits in front of a blank screen and types a message in any fashion desired, using words and even graphics anywhere on the screen. By contrast, EDI messages are highly structured documents with specific requirements for the placement of data in defined positions -- just as in the case of a paper purchase order, for example. It is the adherence to EDI message standards that enables one computer to understand what the other computer has sent and to interpret it accurately. Some organizations still use non-public standards for EDI, such as CADEX, which are called proprietary standards. And though they are very useful, they are not universal. The eventual harmonization of standards on an international scale will enable more rapid and widespread use of EDI to occur with less difficulty.

E-mail and EDI are non-competing and wholly complementary messaging systems that can be used effectively together, but for different purposes. Proprietary versus public standards, on the other hand, are forces pulling in opposite directions. As much as possible, business should adopt public standards so the benefits of EDI can be fully realized.