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by Cindy Chick

Managing your e-mail remotely: advice on maintaining your e-mail relationship

One beautiful Saturday morning in February, I found myself facing a long to-do list. But a friend stopped by with a rescue puppy looking for a home. I don't know about you, but no Saturday list is going to keep me from playing with a puppy. Our neighbor, who happened to be in the market for a new dog, was of the same mind. We watched the pup romp around the yard, take a quick, though unintentional dip in the pool, and darn if he didn't even chase a butterfly. He pulled out all the stops to charm and delight us.

But I'm a practical person. I know that some of that energy and curiosity may lead him to dig up the rose garden. And then he may very well move from chewing garden gloves to chewing leather shoes. He will no doubt need training and guidance to evolve into an upstanding member of society. It will take time, effort, and patience before he can be trusted alone with the cat. All relationships require work. And so does e-mail.

Taking time off from your e-mail responsibilities can result in big problems down the road. Vacations, business travel, or just a trip across town can make it difficult to monitor your e-mail inbox. Spare piles up and messages from Mom or the boss languish unanswered. Low-volume e-mail lists seem to explode in activity the minute you leave town. You eventually return to an inbox to find the latest spam hawking prescription drugs concealing urgent messages. You might as well settle in for the duration, because now you have to pay the piper. Going through your e-mail is going to take some serious time.

Checking e-mail on a regular basis when away from my home computer is a necessity if I hope to keep things from getting out of hand. But how can you be two places at once? When it comes to e-mail, it can be done!

Web-Based E-Mail

Web e-mail has been around for a relatively long time in Internet years and has several advantages. Because it is Web-based, you can use it from any Web-connected computer. During registration, you choose an e-mail address specific to the e-mail site, e.g., cindy@yahoo.com, and then access the Web interface to pick up your e-mail. You can also use your Web-based e-mail account to pick up email from your regular POP or IMAP e-mail accounts. For example, I can configure my Yahoo! e-mail account to pick up my EarthLink e-mail. And many of these Web-based e-mail accounts are free, with the option of increased features and storage for a fee.

Hotmail was one of the first, perhaps the first, to offer Web-based email. It quickly became known as a haven for spammers who quickly set up temporary e-mail accounts, sent out spam, and then abandoned the account just as quickly. Most reputable Web e-mail services have addressed the spammer issue as best as possible by placing limitations on the volume of e-mail sent. Hotmail is still a popular choice for Webmail and was rated 4 out of 5 stars in a recent PCMagazine article ("Can E-Mail Survive?" Feb. 17, 2004, http://www.pcmag.com/arti cle2/0,4149,1476586,00.asp).

PCMagazine's Editor's Choice for Web e-mail went to Mailblocks Extended Service [http://www.mail blocks.com]. PC World also liked Mailblocks so much it was awarded a "Best Buy" tag. After all these rave reviews, I decided to try Mailblocks out for myself.

Mailblocks can collect e-mail from POP e-mail accounts, Yahoo!, Hotmail, and even AOL and uses all e-mail challenge/response technology, as well as disposable e-mail addresses (DEAs) to filter out spam.

The Mailblocks DEAs are called trackers. All messages sent to tracker addresses arrive in your inbox just like any other e-mail. But should you start receiving spare addressed to a tracker, you can delete the address, stopping the spam in its tracks without affecting any of your other e-mail addresses.

But Mailblocks offers much more in its "challenge/response" system, which works as follows:

1. An e-mail message arrives addressed to you.

2. If you have previously approved the sender or their name appears in your address book, the e-mail message goes straight to your inbox.

3. If the sender is new to you, it goes to a pending folder.

4. A "challenge" e-mail message is then sent to the sender, asking the sender to type a confirmation number into a box.

5. Upon completion of the confirmation by the sender, the e-mail message moves from your pending folder to your inbox.

By the way, mail addressed to trackers is not subject to the challenge-response system, which is important for automated mail. After all, there's no one on the other end to respond to the challenge!

After starting my Mailblocks account, I changed all of my mailing list subscriptions to deliver to a Mailblocks tracker address set up just for this purpose. I have had no problems posting to my e-mail lists. I simply choose the correct tracker address from the drop-down box in the Compose window so the "from" address is the appropriate one for that list. I've set up another tracker to use for Web site registration, another one for work-related purposes, and one for shopping. I hope that this will result in a well-trained inbox that I can review in a snap. So far, so good.

But there are more reasons to like Mailblocks other than just its superior spam-fighting capabilities. The interface is clean and efficient, so it chugs along at a fair rate of speed in comparison to other Web-based e-mail. You can opt to pick up your e-mail with Outlook, Outlook Express, or Eudora software programs if you subscribe to the basic or premium service. For example, a couple of times a week, I pick up everything in my Mailblocks inbox via Outlook, so I can operate long-term e-mail storage on my computer. A free, ad-based service is also available. The only downside is the lack of virus checking for attached files, something that Yahoo! Mail has offered for some time now, which can be critically important.

Speaking of which, I've used Yahoo! Mail [http://mail.yahoo.com/] for many years, both the free and pay versions. It includes a fairly decent spam filter and is very easy to use. It also offers address book, calendar, and notepad features. For a little extra money, you can get extra storage and e-mail forwarding. You can even subscribe to Yahoo! By Phone, and listen to your e-mail messages read to you over the phone, if you like that kind of thing.

mail2web [http://mail2web. com] differs from most Web-based email in that it doesn't offer an e-mail account; it simply allows you to quickly and easily pick up e-mail from other e-mail accounts. You don't even have to register: Just type in your e-mail address and password, and up pops messages from your regular POP e-mail account. By the way, for some reason, Mail2web can often gather your messages even when your direct Webmail access shuts down.

Your Internet service provider may also offer Webmail, but I'll warn you that in my experience, these e-mail services are short on features and painfully slow.

So if Webmail is so great, why not just give up on Outlook and collect all your e-mail on the Web? For one thing, e-mail is inevitably slower on the Web. When using Outlook, your messages are downloaded to your computer as a group, making browsing and storing your messages very quick. On the Web, the pages have to refresh whenever you take an action, which inevitably slows things down. And as good as some of the Web services are, they don't have all the bells and whistles provided by a full-featured e-mail program. You can't use the spam-blocking software, filters, folders, etc., that you may have configured on your home computer. There are also storage limitations, though you can typically increase storage for a fee. Search functionality is also noticeably absent on most Webmail services.

But I've found the biggest drawback to Web e-mail is managing email in two different locations. Is that important message I sent last week on Yahoo! or is it on my hard drive?

Remote Control via the Web

If you find these drawbacks to Web-based e-mail discouraging, don't worry. After all, I promised that you could be in two places at once, and you can. Instead of Web-based e-mail, you can opt to connect directly to your computer when away by using remote control software. Keep in mind that these services will require you to leave your computer turned on and connected to the Internet, making a cable or DSL "always on" connection a necessity.

The leader in the field of remote control software is unequivocally GoToMyPC.com. For a monthly subscription cost of $19.95 or $179.40 per year, you can connect to your computer's desktop from just about any Web browser. Here's how it works. First you install the GoToMyPC plug-in on the PC you want to reach, in my case, that's my home computer. (You definitely need a high-speed Internet connection and a Java-enabled browser.) When I'm away from home and want to use my home PC for e-mail, or any other purpose such as checking to see if I've paid last month's electric bill, I open myWeb browser and type "www. gotomypc.com," click connect, fill in my user name and password, then another password (security is important, after all), and voila! I'm able to see and control my home computer.

I can pick up my e-mail using Outlook, run Quicken to check my bank balance, etc. All my sent e-mail will, of course, be saved in my sent file. My spam filters will work just as they do from home because, after all, I AM at home. I've even used GoToMyPC to test a Web site that behaved badly at work to see how it would run in a more generic environment. You can also transfer files from your remote computer to your host computer. The last time we had a thunder storm I used GoToMyPC to turn off my home computer while I was at the office.

I've sometimes wondered if my house cleaners were ever startled to see my computer apparently operating all by itself. And this does bring up a privacy concern. You have no way of knowing if someone is watching what you're doing on the computer you're connecting to, since you're not physically in the room. So keep that in mind. Keeping your monitor turned off when you're away will help, but it isn't failsafe.

You can also use GoToMyPC to share your desktop with someone else in a remote location by right-clicking on the GoToMyPC icon in your system tray and selecting "Invite Guest to PC."

GoToMyPC PocketView now serves PDA users, but as one reviewer noted, "... maneuvering my system's 1152-by-864 desktop from a 240-by-320 screen was unwieldy in the extreme" ("GoToMyPC Gets Pocketed," by Harry McCracken, PC World, September 2003, http://www.pcwofld.com/reviews/art icle/0,aid, 111795,00.asp). Everything has its limitations.

Certainly in large organizations, your IT department may have security concerns about using a tool like this at work. So tread carefully, and don't run GoToMyPC to connect to your work computer without discussing it with your technology people. By the way, GoToMyPC also offers a corporate edition that employs RSA's SecurID technology for heavy-duty authentication. You'll

likely see more of GoToMyPC in enterprise situations, as it was recently bought by the king of remote enterprise computing, Citrix.

GoToMyPC may lead the market for remote control, but it's not the only fish in the sea. LapLink Everywhere is a similar product with some significant differences.

LapLink Everywhere [http://www. laplink.com] is designed to allow you to perform basic functions on your home PC via the Web, predominately Outlook tasks, though you can also transfer files. After establishing an account, downloading the required software, and logging on, you will see a Web-based view of your Outlook inbox, contacts, notes, calendar, and tasks. It doesn't look like Outlook mind you, but it functions in a similar way. You can even view your archives, though you can't sort them, which caused me some difficulties finding recent e-mails in my sent folder. By the way, in my testing, LapLink Everywhere didn't solve my "sent e-mail" dilemma. The one e-mail I sent via LE did not end up back in my Outlook sent folder. Oh well.

If you want complete access to your computer a la GoToMyPC, you can opt for the LapLink Secure VNC. I didn't test this portion of the service, but reports indicate that it can be a bit of a slug.

If you don't have high-speed access to the computer you want to reach, LapLink Everywhere may work better for you than GoToMyPC. LapLink Everywhere also reportedly works better via a PDA. Also, LapLink Everywhere only costs $9.95 per month, compared to $19.95 per month for GoToMyPC, though adding the LapLink Secure VNC will add $4.95 to the monthly bill.

Wireless--The Ultimate Commitment

If you truly can't be away from your e-mail for more than a few minutes, it may mean you're ready for the ultimate in e-mail commitment, a wireless Palm or pocket PC, or perhaps even an Internet-enabled cell phone. For information on available cell phone services see "Beyond the Dial Tone," PC World, April 2004 [http:// www.pcworld.com/reviews/article/ 0,aid,114729,00.asp].

The latest trend is a combined PDA/telephone such as the Treo or the BlackBerry 5810. It's a phone, no it's a PDA, no, it's two, two, two devices in one!

Selected airlines are making plans to cater to the Internet-addicted. Boeing has announced its Connexion high-speed Internet service will allow you to pick up your e-mail from your wireless laptop or PDA while cruising at 30,000 feet.

The options are limitless.

Latest Development

Google recently upped the ante when it comes to Webmail. On April 1st, Google announced its own Web-based e-mail solution, Gmail [http://gmail. google.com]. What makes Gmail revolutionary is its search-based approach --after all, it is Google we're talking about! It will offer 1 gigabyte of free memory, many times what the other Webmail services offer. Why so much? The idea is that you'll never have to delete another e-mail again. Every email can be saved, and later retrieved, using the Google search technology.

Of course, there's no free lunch, and while Gmail will be free, your email messages will be scanned for keywords to help Google target text ads that relate to the e-mail you read. Only the Google computers will know your secrets, or at least that's the theory. But if the idea of seeing ads for antacids when viewing an e-mail from a friend about his/her recent stomach problems gives you the creeps, Gmail may not be your cup of tea. Are there more serious privacy concerns? It's hard to know at this point, but at the very least you'll have to determine your own comfort level about your entire e-mail history residing on a computer not your own. And we

haven't begun to consider the vulnerability of users who treat that 1 gigabyte as free off-site storage for all their essential files, masquerading as e-mail messages to self. Gmail has not yet been generally released as of this writing, so the details are still sketchy.

Practice Safe Remote Computing

One last word concerning privacy concerns. Don't forget to practice safe computing. If you picking up your email on a public machine, such as the kind you'd find in Internet cafes and hotel business centers, be sure to clear the browser cache, history, and temporary Internet files. And make sure not to inadvertently save your password on that computer!! After all, there are limits. You may want remote access to your e-mail, but you certainly don't want to provide it to others!

Internet Mailing Lists

Consider using a Web-based e-mail service rather than your work e-mail identity to manage your Internet mailing lists. I've done this as long as I've had e-mail, and it has worked out quite nicely. Your work inbox stays neat and tidy, and the amount of spam you receive at work drops greatly. If you DO start receiving large quantities of spam due to your list correspondence, you can easily abandon that e-mail account and start fresh with a new address. It's much easier to change a personal e-mail address to get rid of spam than it is to change a work e-mail address!