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Email again

I know I've written about this before, several times, but I've found that of all the problems my clients experience, loss of e-mail connectivity is among the worst. It's still the holiday season; people still travel; they wish to send and receive e-mail and they invariably call me when they can't. Why not? Well, that depends on which kind of e-mail system they are using.

JUST POPPING OUT

Typically, there are two systems that we might use: POP3 and IMAP. Most e-mail accounts provided by ISPs use the POP3 (Post Office Protocol) standard. POP3 e-mail is simple and works very similarly to sending and receiving a letter. When you receive an e-mail via POP3, that e-mail is copied from your ISP's mail server directly to your computer, and then deleted from the mail server. It's equivalent to the postman dropping a letter through your letterbox. The fact that the letter is on your doormat means that it is no longer at the sorting office. IMAP (Internet Message Access Protocol) works differently: rather than the letter dropping through your letterbox it's as if you can see straight into the sorting office to read it; your e-mail remains in your mailbox at the sorting office and is not copied to your computer unless you ask it to be.

IMAP sent e-mail is also stored on the mail server rather than on the computer on which you wrote it, which is where POP3 email is stored. Consequently, and unlike POP3 e-mail, you can always read your sent e-mails and follow your

complete correspondence history no matter which computer you use to log into your IMAP account.

Usually, when travelling, it's almost always possible to receive e-mail as long as you have a working Internet connection. Sending mail is the problem, the result of the proliferation of spam e-mail. Let's go back to the letter analogy. When you send a letter you don't poke it out through your front door's letterbox and hope that a postman standing outside will pick it up and take it away. You walk to a post box and stick it into the slot. The same is true of sending e-mail. Sent e-mail travels out to your ISP's mail server over Internet port 25. When receiving e-mail, you get it from the mail server over Internet port 110. In order to reduce spam, many ISPs insist that you have an account with them and route all traffic on port 25 to their own mail server. This means that when travelling, you can't connect to your own mail server to send mail because your connection provider has blocked it. As you are unlikely to have an account with the ISP providing the connection you're using, your mail simply doesn't go anywhere.

MOBILE, ME?

Because of the way in which IMAP mail is sent directly to your own mail server, it's rarely a source of spam. Most corporate mail systems are based on IMAP, and ISPs tend to try not to block corporate e-mail. Consequently, IMAP e-mail almost always works in both directions no matter what kind of Internet connection you have. Funnily enough, that is exactly what MobileMe provides.

The Digital Plumber

By Paul Ellis



Recently I've been making greater use of my MobileMe e-mail address. I've found it to be fast, reliable and effectively spam-filtered. For me, this is worth the £59 yearly charge by itself. Coupled with automatic Mail setup, calendar and address book synchronization, Back To My Mac encrypted remote access and filesharing, straightforward synchronisation with the iPhone, iDisk and the rest, for me it has become essential.

One objection I hear from clients to the use of MobileMe addresses is that they can't use their own domain name and think it looks unprofessional. I don't agree; I see nothing wrong with having your own domain name for your website while simultaneously running your communications through MobileMe. It's what I now do.

A CAUTIONARY TALE

You might have heard a story about a famous rock group who insisted in their tour contracts on having bowls of

M&Ms, with the blue ones removed, placed in their dressing room. The story isn't apocryphal: the group was Bon Jovi. What a bunch of petulant ***** you might think, but years later the real reason for their demands emerged. They were running a big production, had specific, important technical requirements and needed a quick and easy way to check whether or not the concert promoters had read and implemented all of the provisions in their contract. Stipulating something as piffing as bowls of M&Ms with the blue ones removed gave them an immediate indicator: if the promoters had done that they'd clearly read the entire contract, and having acted on something so trivial had probably done everything else required of them, too. On the other hand, if the blue ones were still there, what else hadn't been done?

I recently updated my copy of Microsoft Office 2008 from version 12.2.2 to 12.2.3. I selected "Check for Updates" from Word's Help menu, which launched Microsoft AutoUpdate and found that there was also a "critical" update to the Office Open XML converter, required to convert new-format Office documents into a form that Office 2004 can open.

I quit Word and allowed AutoUpdate to download both updater files. The Open XML installer ran first and promptly stalled. I poked around and eventually realised that it had thrown up a warning window, hidden behind the Installer window, requiring me to manually quit Microsoft AutoUpdate. I obeyed its command and the Installer ran. When it

finished, AutoUpdate launched again and checked for updates. Sure enough, it found and downloaded the large Office 12.2.3 update file a second time. The Installer ran, had me agree to sign my life away, and then spent a good half-minute "examining additional volumes" before proceeding. At that point there were no additional volumes mounted on my MacBook Pro, but it carried on looking for them, regardless. Finally the whole pantomime concluded and here I am, writing again.

Judged by this performance Microsoft, the world's largest and richest software company, seem unable to test for, find and repair an obvious, customer-facing design fault that will manifest whenever their AutoUpdate application downloads more than one updater file at once. They also seem unable to create a Macintosh software installer intelligent enough to automatically quit open applications and install multiple updates consecutively, something that Apple's Software Update application has been able to do for well over a decade. I could list many other examples. Going back to Bon Jovi, if Microsoft can't find and fix such an obvious mistake, how many other mistakes are there left in the code, hidden from view?



I suppose the moral of the story is that if you care for your products in such a manner you'll grow up to be the world's largest and richest software company.

BLATHER

This article is a bit of a first for me in that I have written most of it using MacSpeech Dictate. In other words, rather than spending all day two-finger pecking at a keyboard, I have spent all day blathering at my computer, watching words appear on the screen, and then trying to sort my stream of consciousness into a readable article. Very interesting. I think that when I'm more used to it, it will be a real step forward. Recommended.

LINKS

- [Microsoft Office 2008:](http://bit.ly/jFH2Z) <http://bit.ly/jFH2Z>
- [POP3:](http://bit.ly/5CzZBC) <http://bit.ly/5CzZBC>
- [IMAP:](http://bit.ly/6514as) <http://bit.ly/6514as>
- [MobileMe:](http://bit.ly/BPFOy) <http://bit.ly/BPFOy>
- [MacSpeech Dictate:](http://bit.ly/61F9FV) <http://bit.ly/61F9FV>

PDFs of this and all my other IMAGE articles are available to download at www.thedigitalplumber.co.uk, each with live weblinks for your browsing pleasure. Go and get 'em.

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