

On Becoming an e-Agent-e-Mail on the Fly Continued Part XIII

By Jo Becker, GRI, BA

Last month we talked about the freedom and flexibility of accessing your e-mail account from any computer. The very convenience of it sold me on the concept many years ago, but there are additional reasons to consider remote access or web-based e-mail systems.

First let's look at the technological difference between accessing e-mail at home (or the office) via standard software such as Microsoft Outlook or Outlook Express verses remote access. In Scenario One: First, you boot your computer, establish an internet connection, and the open Outlook (easily the most widely used program out there). The next thing you do is check for new messages. What your computer is actually doing is "talking" to your ISP's (internet service provider's) computers and, if it finds new messages, downloads those messages to your computer's hard drive. Once downloaded, you're able to read and respond to the messages.

With remote access via a web-based e-mail system, Scenario Two, you sit down to anyone's computer anywhere (assuming an active internet connection is available) and log into a website in order to view your e-mail account. Any new messages will be available to view, but you're essentially accessing those messages on your ISP's computers. Let me say that again because that's a fundamental difference... You're accessing your e-mail via your ISP's computers. That is, the computer you're using is "talking" to your ISP's computers and looking at your messages *without* downloading them to the computer you are sitting at.

That fundamental difference is the reason the following features of web-based e-mail systems are possible. These features are, in my mind, *very strong* incentives for using remote access e-mail:

1. If you have business partners or family members that you share your e-mail account with, web-based e-mail will allow each of you to log in (wherever you or they may be) and see any new messages instantly. In the process of downloading messages to your computer (i.e., Scenario One) these messages are removed from your ISP's computers. The only way you or those you share an account with can see, read, or respond to those downloaded messages is to sit at the very computer you retrieved the messages from. In Scenario Two, you never actually download the messages from your ISP's computers—they stay there!—and are, therefore, available at anytime, from any computer. My partners and I have found this extremely useful as it allows all three of us to be fully mobile, but still have complete access to any new and old messages in our account instantly and simultaneously.

2. Understanding that "remote access"—just as the words themselves imply—means you're accessing your e-mail messages remotely and therefore, not downloading them to the computer you're using should give most readers a hint at another compelling reason to use it. That is, if you do not download messages to your computer, your exposure to computer viruses is dramatically reduced. This is true for two reasons. First, most computer virus writers target Microsoft Outlook/Outlook Express simply because it is the most prevalent software on the market; meaning their darling viruses have the greatest possibility of spreading further faster. Using a web-based e-mail system necessarily means that you won't be using Outlook, but rather a website designed and programmed by or for your ISP. Second, one contracts a virus by opening an infected message and/or attachment. If you never download your messages to your computer, you can see that your risk drops exponentially. Now, if you read a message and download an infected attachment from it... well, call your technician; it's time for your computer to go to the repair shop. One should remain appropriately leery of attachments and handle them with care, but the simple viewing of e-mail messages posses very little risk with remote access systems.

Most of the web-based systems I've seen have typical if limited e-mail features (spell check, address books, etc.) however their functionality and options vary widely. I would, however, be remiss if I didn't discuss a couple downsides:

1. Web-based systems often look quite different than the user-friendly Outlook format. For those new to the internet, this may be confusing.

2. More importantly, if you retain all of your e-mail messages on your ISP's computers, one can surmise that if you're ISP's computer should crash—unfortunate but it happens to us all, including to the techies at our ISPs—your information (setting preferences, address book, etc.) and very likely all of your old messages will be lost forever. This can be a truly painful experience. Unfortunately, I speak from experience here and have since found ways to “back up” the data, given the way my particular web-based system works. Nothing in this life is all together perfect but for me and my business partners, the pros of remote access e-mail far out way the cons. Talk with your ISP and see if web-based e-mail is right for you.

And, as always, if all of this seems too overwhelming, ask for help, but keep trying! Before long you will get the hang of it. In the meantime, *hang in there!*



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