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from the January 29, 2001 edition

Too many e-mail 'in boxes'? Route all your messages into one

James Turner

You've got mail!

Unfortunately, these days, you may have e-mail scattered everywhere. You may have an account at work, one with your home Internet service provider, others with online giants like Yahoo! or Hotmail. And if you're a student, add a school e-mail address.

Checking all these sources can be maddening. While there's no single solution for consolidating e-mail addresses, a number of strategies can help reduce the problem.

Let's assume you have an e-mail account at the office, one with AOL, a Yahoo! account, and one from finance megasite money.net. How do you consolidate this mess?

First off, the worst place to consolidate e-mail is at work, since that may be the only place you would be able to read your messages. Instead, look for an account with universal access. A Web-based e-mail provider like Yahoo! offers this advantage, since you can hop on its website from just about anywhere. Yahoo! e-mail can also be configured to download mail from other providers using POP3 (an Internet protocol used to download e-mail). Yahoo! will forward your mail to another address, if you choose to aggregate elsewhere.

The disadvantage of services like Yahoo! is that if you get a lot of e-mail, especially with large attachments, you can quickly run over your allotted disk space.

Difficulties also may arise when you ask workplace techies to forward work e-mail to an outside account. They may not wish to do so for security reasons. (They also may be too busy to deal with your problem.)

Problems also arise when workplaces use Internet-unfriendly mail programs like Microsoft Exchange and Lotus Notes. (I'm sure Microsoft and IBM will protest that their products work fine on the Web, but the reality is that they are not as straightforward to configure as a plain old POP3 account from an Internet service provider.)

If you have Internet access through an ISP, or have a website through a hosting service, it may provide e-mail accounts, complete with Web access. This is probably the best consolidation option, as such services usually offer much more disk space to hold your mail, compared with the free services.

Unfortunately, America Online is an island unto itself. About all you can do is forward all your other e-mail accounts into your AOL account. You can't automatically forward your mail from AOL, and you can't check mail from other services. If you have an account with money.net, you're in the same boat. So perhaps the best advice is to start out with the right e-mail providers, or you may later find your mail scattered to the four winds.

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