Selecting the right email system for your business

Keep email simple — and focus on your business

SITUATION As a principal at Red and Associates, a Spokane-based HR company, Pam DeCounter wears a lot of hats. She's a business owner, a manager, a salesperson, a problem solver. But one thing she freely admits—she's not an IT expert. "That's one hat that just doesn't fit me," Pam laughs. So when it came to selecting an email system for her business, she turned to the people she knew.

"I called friends and other small business owners I know and I just asked them what they do," she recalls. "And that's how I learned that I didn't have to do it all myself." Pam's requirements were simple: reliability, access and simplicity. And she found that going with a hosted solution fit all three. Especially the simplicity part.

RESULT Today Pam's company gets both their web hosting and email from one provider, which offers cost savings over using different providers for each. She likes the simplicity of using a hosted provider, their POP3 service allows her to download her messages to Outlook on her laptop and webmail lets her access email even when travelling overseas.

"Email is our lifeline," she explains. "So being able to access email from anywhere is essential." As she continues to educate herself on technology, Pam ponders a move to IMAP. "If I ever find myself using different computers a lot, it might make sense. But for now, I've got enough to think about."

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Why is the right email system important?

Email is more than just a way to send messages and files; it's often considered the lifeline of your business. For many businesses, email is the primary means of communicating both internally and with customers and clients. Your email must perform the functions you need, be accessible from a variety of locations and provide the right level of capacity and reliability. Choosing the right type of email solution can have a big impact on your business. Read on for more about your choices and how they differ.

Acronyms aplenty

Emails are sent using SMTP, simple message transfer protocol. But they can be received in several different ways: webmail, POP or IMAP.

Webmail: Basically this is email viewed on the Internet using a web browser. Many email providers offer this, but some don't.

Pros: Accessible from any Internet-enabled computer.
Cons: Because it requires you to open a browser and log in to your account, it's not as versatile or convenient as email delivered to an email client.

Post Office Protocol (POP): When using an email client like Outlook or Eudora, POP3 (version 3 of the protocol) sends new messages to your client and deletes them on the server (you can tell it to keep a copy if you wish). This helps save server space and is ideal if you usually check your email from the same place.

Pros: Offers fast message delivery and saves server space.
Cons: If you check your email from multiple devices, your inbox can get out of sync.

Internet Message Access Protocol (IMAP): IMAP maintains a duplicate of your email inbox on the server. When new messages are read or a message saved as a draft, for example, IMAP automatically updates the server. So you can open and send email in Outlook and when you check email on your mobile phone, your inbox will look the same as it did on your computer.

Pros: Makes managing email from multiple locations easy.

Cons: Requires more server space.

Which to choose?

Which type of email you choose depends largely on how you think you'll use your email. Plus, many providers offer webmail as well as POP3 or IMAP. Here are some basic guidelines:

Ask for webmail if…

You frequently check email using a web browser. This is common when using other computers that aren't yours when traveling or moving between multiple offices.

Ask for POP3 if…

You generally check email from one location such as a work computer or mobile device.

Ask for IMAP if…

You own or work on multiple computers and/or mobile devices and want your email in sync on all of them.

Again, you may not need to choose one over the other. Just be sure that the email you choose meets your specific needs.

How much does having your own domain matter?

Your personal email address can be all kinds of things. But with a business, your email address is an important part of your identity. Because of this, even if they don't have a web site, many businesses choose email addresses that end with their own domain (@yourbusinessname.com), sometimes called "vanity email." Having your business name as a part of your email address is an easy way to help your business gain credibility and to help customers and associates quickly identify your messages.

Tip: **If you have more than one email address, but want to receive all messages in one place, consider using an email forwarding service. Email forwarding automatically redirects incoming messages from the receiving account to the one you specify. Check with your Internet Service Provider for options.**

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Selecting the Right Email System Q&A

Free vs. Paid vs. Do-It-Yourself

Many business owners struggle over this question. When deciding on an email strategy, consider some key factors that may affect your decision.

Is free really free?

Free email services (e.g. Hotmail or Yahoo! Mail) are extremely common today and can be tempting for a business owner. But when you choose free email, you may also be sacrificing elsewhere. Free services generally don't offer much in the way of technical support, so you're on your own when things go wrong. Virus and spam controls can be hit or miss, with some being better than others. And most free email providers do not support custom domains (you@yourbusinessname.com). This could cause your messages to be blocked or deleted and could make your business seem less credible.

Paid email service

If you decide that free isn't for you, the next option is to purchase your email service. The first place to look is your ISP (it might be included with your Internet service), but there are also a number of other good choices out there. Before making a decision, check if the service will:

- Let you use your own domain for email (you@ yourbusinessname.com)

- Support POP3 and/or IMAP (so you can send and receive email on your computer)

- Provide 24/7 technical support in case of problems

- Regularly update virus and spam controls

- Offer added features such as out-of-office replies, forwarding, and unlimited mailboxes

A server of your very own

Hosting your own email in-house is more work, but gives you total control over your email. Benefits can include maximum mailbox sizes and attachment limits, autoreplies, better spam and virus control and more. However, you'll also need your own domain, server and software, and somebody who knows what to do with it all.

Q: Worried about security?

A: Look into email encryption software to add a layer of protection for sensitive emails.

Q: When I check my email on my mobile phone, a lot of my messages are missing, and vice-versa. Why?

A: You most likely have a POP3 account but you're accessing it from multiple devices. If your provider doesn't offer IMAP, try changing the default account settings to keep messages in your inbox until you delete them.

Related Guides

Harnessing Internet-based computing

Managing data storage

Maximizing your Internet connection

For more detailed information about selecting the right email system, please refer to the accompanying white paper on this topic.

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Where to start?

The first place to look is usually your Internet Service Provider (ISP). Basic email service is usually complimentary with more robust offerings available for a fee. Or look around at domain registrars and third-party vendors such as GoDaddy.com, Register.com, Juno.com, or Earthlink.com.

When comparing services, look for some key features:

- POP3 and/or IMAP support
- Custom (or vanity) email addresses (e.g. you@ yourbusinessname.com)
- Email forwarding, autoreply, and out-of-office replies
- Spam and virus control

The risks with free email

- Lack of support when things go wrong
- Ads and privacy concerns
- Mailbox and attachment limits
- Customer and partner perception

Need more? We're with you.

Your community representative is always happy to help. You can count on them as a resource for compliance solutions to consider that fit your specific business needs, budget and level of expertise, as well as advice and resources on a range of small business technology issues.

Visit **http://centurylink.com/smb-resources** to contact your community representative, and learn more about how technology can boost your business. You'll find information sheets, videos, case studies and more.

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