

Title:

Microsoft Outlook: Traveller's Secret Advantage

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<p>Helps you stay productive on the road Guidance for Owners/Managers

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<p> If you want to become a better traveller, you can skip some of those how-to books penned by armchair road warriors.

Instead, fire up your laptop computer and open Microsoft Outlook. Yes, I'm talking about that ever-present application that handles e-mail, scheduling and some word processing tasks.

Make the Most of Your Laptop

Odds are pretty good that you've got a copy of it installed on your laptop, and that you take your portable with you when you travel. (Regarding the latter point, a recent survey by Harris Interactive found that more than one in four laptop PC owners say their machine is one of their "most prized possessions," and nearly a third said they've regretted leaving it at home on trips and have turned around to retrieve it on at least one occasion.)

Outlook is to travellers what a paper clip is to MacGyver. It does a lot more than you think. (My apologies to those who aren't familiar with television show which had its heyday in the 1980s and '90s.)

Using Scheduling Features for a Trip

Marielle Barnes, a consultant in Bangalore, India, counts on Outlook's scheduling features to make her trip fall into place. "I use the task manager to keep my 'to-do' list in order," she says. "I organise the tasks by

city, and type of function, so that items get grouped and can be easily completed in a stretch." An alternative is keeping her itinerary on a calendar or a personal digital assistant. But if the laptop is coming along for the trip anyway, why not use what you've got (especially when it has a bigger screen than a PDA)?

Robert Hanson relies on Outlook and a third-party application called Xpressions to access his e-mails from a phone - a nifty feature if you happen to leave your laptop at the hotel. "Outlook saved me from wasting money on a plane ticket by finding out the same day that I booked a non-refundable ticket that the meeting was supposed to attend was cancelled," says Hanson, from Wilmington, Del. "So I was able to cancel the flight without penalty."

Outlook has bailed me out a few times, too.

My favourite feature is the contacts manager, which has rescued me more often than I'd care to admit. How's that? I usually print a full itinerary with phone numbers before I leave on a trip. (Call me old-fashioned, but with a piece of paper you never have to worry about a low battery.) Being hopelessly absent-minded, that schedule has gone missing numerous times. Fortunately, I was able to retrieve the key addresses and phone numbers from Outlook rather than completely unpack my luggage in the middle of the terminal.

A Traveler-Friendly Upgrade

To say that Outlook has been underappreciated by the jet set in the past might be an understatement. But that is changing. Microsoft Outlook 2003 is designed even more with travellers in mind.

Here are a few of its handy features:

- Find it faster. Outlook helps you make sense of all the e-mail you receive on the road. Its new Search Folders - "virtual" folders that contain views of all e-mail items matching specific search criteria - let you quickly separate the important messages from the ones you want to ignore. Search Folders also flag priority messages first, so you don't waste time reading spam.

- Keep junk mail out. Speaking of spam, the new Junk E-mail folder separates out most of your junk mail into a separate folder, helping to un-clutter your inbox.

Work without a Net. If you use an e-mail account through Microsoft Exchange Server, you can work offline while you're out of the office or if your connection is too slow. Outlook only tries to connect to the server when you ask it to or when you choose to do so in the "Send/Receive" groups.

Mine your business contacts. The new Business Contact Manager feature, which integrates with Outlook, turns your address book into a powerful tool that can create, track, and manage your business contacts, sales leads and opportunities. Perhaps the best thing about Business Contact Manager is that it's as intuitive as the old Outlook, so you don't have to spend hours reading a manual before you can use it.

Cool "Feel" to Outlook 2003

Think of the latest version of Outlook as MacGyver trading in his screwdriver for a power tool. Both gizmos worked fine, but somehow that drill just looks cooler. (Indeed, the new icons and "feel" of Outlook have my friends who use older versions or other e-mail systems drooling.)

But best of all, the Outlook 2003 with Business Contact Manager promises to make me more productive on the road.

As the publisher of a travel e-mail newsletter, I was particularly impressed with integrated features that allowed me to send personalised messages to designated contacts, with the help of List Builder. In an age when clients are less likely to accept "I was travelling" as an excuse for missing deadlines, that's something that will probably help me keep the customers I have. And maybe find some new ones.

With Outlook 2003, the learning curve is steep on a few functions - I'm still trying to figure out how to get my navigation pane to do what I want it to, for example - and users of the old Outlook will have some adjusting to do.

But it won't take long to get the hang of it. And once you do, the new Outlook will become an even bigger reason (if you need one) to bring your laptop on a trip.