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Mail on the move

For those of you who need to send email while away from home or the office, Davey Winder road-tests a plethora of Webmail services to satisfy all needs

Over the last few months this column has dealt with many real-world email issues, but the one that solicited the biggest reader response has undoubtedly been the problem of deleting large emails from POP servers. The easiest solutions to this perennial problem all turned out to involve using Web-based services to get the message headers and delete the offending items from the server. Webmail has a lot more going for it than just being an emergency mailbox opening tool, yet a surprising number of folk don't seem to know much about it.

At a recent editorial meeting at Dennis Publishing, the Editorial Director of Dennis, *PC Pro's* Editor, News & Features Editor and I all agreed that we'd all be lost without Webmail, and we were all surprised when the consensus of other opinion was that we were in a minority of 'pro' PC users in using it.

It seems that Hotmail's marketing machine has been so successful in branding that particular pioneer in the field as an easy-to-use email solution for novices that every Webmail service is now tarred with the same brush, and 'serious' business users have a tendency to steer away in favour of something they can pay for. However, equating quality with cost in the topsy-turvy world of the Web doesn't always make sense these days.

Hotmail isn't necessarily the best example, but Web-based email services are probably better suited to the business user – the travelling business user at any rate – than to any other class of user. At home I wouldn't particularly want to poll all my email using a Web-based interface, as it will always be relatively clunky and slow compared to a dedicated email client connecting directly to a POP3 or IMAP server without the intervention of HTTP to slow things down.

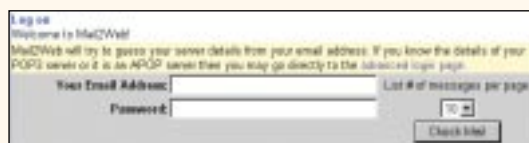
However, as a professional whose job takes me around the world, I'd be lost without these services, which enable me to efficiently and cheaply keep in touch wherever I happen to be because just about every destination I find myself in has an Internet café of some kind now. I can forget all those GSM mobile roaming agreements, with their painfully slow, and painfully expensive, data transfer rates, and I'm not forced to pay whatever swingeing cost per unit the manager of Noddy Hotels has thought up to fleece his guests.

I do cover all bases, I'll admit, by also carrying a PocketPC device with both a Compact-Flash 56K modem and a GSM phone with IrDA and modem built in, and a sub-subnotebook (that's not a typing error – what else would you call a Transmeta Crusoe-driven Sony C1VE if not sub-sub?) for good measure.

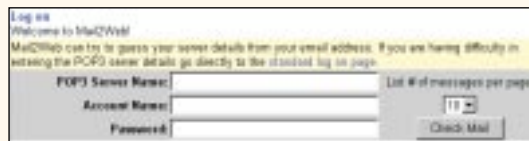
But even with this amount of highly portable kit, I've still often found myself without the right telephone socket connector/convertor, or with no GSM signal, or whatever. And let's face it, it's much more

civilised to sit sipping coffee and munching cake while collecting your email and dashing off a couple of important messages with the comfort of a full-size screen and keyboard in an Internet café.

But I come not to praise Hotmail and its offspring, but rather to hymn the most useful Web-based email service there is, and one which remains largely unpublicised, except by way of the on-line grapevine. The service in question is Mail2Web, and you can find it by pointing your browser at www.mail2web.com, your Palm or Pocket PC device at www.mail2pda.com, or even your WAP-equipped mobile at www.mail2wap.com. Did I mention that this also happens to be a versatile service?



■ The Mail2Web basic logon is quick and simple, and can second-guess most popular ISP mailbox details.



■ The advanced login raises usability a notch or two, perfect for accessing your own POP3 boxes.

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or join him in *PC Pro's* on-line conference.

Mail2Web is not just another Webmail service, as there's no option to sign up for a free mail2web.com email address. And long may that continue, because I'd hate to see its resources diverted away from the core concept of this business, which would almost inevitably dilute its worth. Nope, what Mail2Web does, and does exceptionally well, is to act as a Web-based email client for your existing POP3 mailbox accounts.



■ Follow the '128bit' link for a secure connection to satisfy even the most paranoid of users.

The first thing you'll notice on using Mail2Web for the first time, and one of the reasons I like it so much, is that there's no time wasted in registering to use the service like so many others in this game. Mail2Web seems to appreciate that its user base is going to consist largely of busy people with little time to waste, especially as accessing their email this way suggests they're on the road and therefore on a schedule.

To use it, all you do is type in your email address and password, which is enough detail for most general-purpose ISP-supplied mailboxes as Mail2Web will fill in the blanks. If you have your own POP3 mailbox, or a box hosted somewhere with multiple accounts contained within it, then you'll need the advanced login screen, which is just as quick and simple, requiring your server and account names instead of just your email address. Once completed, the outcome is the same either way – give it 20 seconds or so and any mail outstanding on the server is found, and the headers displayed in the Web browser screen.

The first time I heard of this service a year or two ago I was wary about whether to use it. You can hardly blame me: with so many scamsters working on the Web to chisel either information or money out of you, being asked to volunteer my mailbox password seemed a little iffy. However, having made a number of enquiries and being satisfied that this was a genuine business and not a fly-boy data-gathering exercise, I bit the bullet. Well, I nibbled it actually, and tried it out with a mailbox I created especially for the purpose of testing the security of Mail2Web.

It worked well, and after a month of regular use there was no evidence of any data tampering, no increase in spam that I could trace back to Mail2Web, nothing but a service that did exactly what it said on the packet. Mail2Web doesn't record your activities, and it doesn't store or capture any user information, according to the privacy notice (the fact that it even has a privacy notice is always a good sign in my not at all humble opinion). I'm reliably informed that the site doesn't even keep browser navigation information – the next and previous click-trail stuff – that so many supposedly privacy-aware sites do.

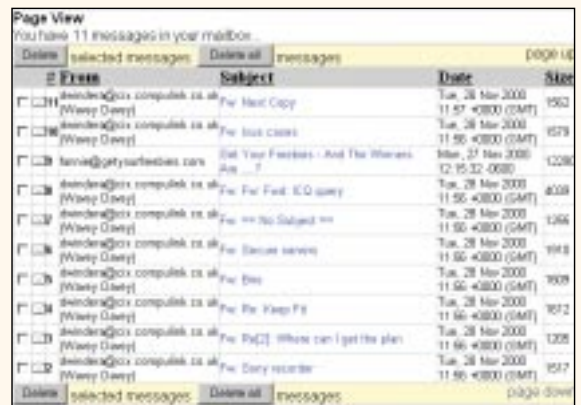
If you're at all concerned about the privacy of messages traversing the WeboSphere, then you could always click on the '128-bit' link which ensures that the whole thing is done on a SSL server so that all message bodies are encrypted, along with their address and password details that get encrypted anyway using the standard login process.

Of course, like any Web-based service of this type that

you're likely to be using in a fairly public place, I always recommend doing the most you can to proactively secure your peace of mind, especially when you've finished with it for that session. So, at the very least make use of the 'log off' option to finish your session, and if possible flush the browser cache and close all browser windows as well to be on the safe side.

Of course, all the aforementioned praise would be of little significance if the interface itself were pants, but fortunately Mail2Web's most certainly isn't. You can quickly see who a message is from, the subject line, date and time details and size of the posting and any attachments – click on the subject and the message is displayed in full in a new browser window.

Tick the checkbox next to a message header and that item will be deleted from the mail server, so don't do this with messages you want to keep on your home/office PC. Leave the checkbox blank and the messages, whether you read them at Mail2Web or not, remain on the POP3 server and are available for download as usual with your desktop PC email client.



■ The interface is clear and concise, and your mailbox details load up in an instant.

There are some simple configuration options available, but nothing to get too excited about: mainly sort and display options such as display ordering (new first, old first, newest ten, oldest ten, sort by size, sort by sender, that kind of thing).

There's also a simple search facility that lets you trawl through either the 'from' or 'subject' headers, but that's pretty much it really. Of course, the point is that you don't need much more, and that adding superfluous fancies would slow the thing down and defeat the whole point of such a streamlined resource.



■ You can send and reply as well as receive, making Mail2Web a good all-rounder for mobile mailers.

What I really like about the Mail2Web service is its flexibility for professional users with a job to do, users who may need to access their email urgently on any available device – users like me and, I suspect, a lot of you too. The service is so flexible it bends over backwards to help. Don't have access to a full-sized screen; need to access a particular mailbox in a hurry; only have your Palm or Pocket PC device available? No problem, you just go to www.mail2pda.com instead, where exactly the same service is to be found, but formatted ➔

real world computing

on-line



■ The Mail2Pda service formats everything for a Palm or Pocket PC device.



perfectly to fit your palmtop PC.

No functionality is lost in this process, and that's an achievement in itself if you look at many of the dedicated small-format mail clients available. What if you've not even got a palm-sized machine with you, you're in the back of a taxi and you desperately need to check whether a particular message has arrived in your mailbox? No problem, use your existing WAP gateway provider to point the phone at www.mail2wap.com and there's even a dedicated WAP version of the service.

It's not as usable as the others because of the limitations of the WAP display, but it's configurable enough to make it workable. Best of all, it's a lot quicker than many WAP services I've used, and it can be a real lifesaver. Heck, anything that lets me read bog-standard POP3 email on a WAP-enabled phone has to be good news, doesn't it? ☉

■ At last, a useful WAP service in the shape of Mail2Wap.