

## Expert IT Solutions Newsletter

Issue 5 December 2014

First I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you all for a great 2014. I wish you and your family a safe, peaceful and joyous Christmas and New Year's break.



Welcome to another edition of this newsletter looking at IT from a Small Business perspective. In this edition we'll look at managing email and Platform as a Service in the cloud.



### Managing the email flood

I worked with computers before internet based email was available and I can still remember my excitement when I read about how a big company (Volvo) was using email to improve their business. Back in those days, if you were a supplier to Volvo in Sweden you had to install very expensive hardware just to be able to send and receive emails..... with Volvo employees. No one else.

We've come a long way since then and most small (and big) businesses rely more on email than any other form of communication for their day to day operations.

But like any technology, email can have negative impact if it's not managed well. I think everyone's had the experience of the dreaded inbox, full of unimportant messages, spam and other crud, with a few emails hidden in there that you actually need to read and do something about.

Here are my tips, gained through experience over the years, for managing email so that it becomes a productivity boost, not a drain:

1. Turn off notifications in Outlook (In Outlook 2013: File – Options – Mail – Message Arrival. Uncheck all boxes). There's nothing more toxic to productivity than being distracted away from what you were working on by something unimportant. Make a habit (it'll only take a few weeks to get used to it) of checking email at set times of the day. When you first start work, before lunch, afternoon tea, last thing before going home, or whatever works for you. But that's the only time to check email, not every five minutes.
2. Use folders. I know there are some people that like to keep everything in their inbox (we call them "pilers") but several studies I've looked at over the years have shown that moving emails to subfolders improves productivity (people who do this are called "filers"). When the time that you've set aside for reading emails comes around and you've gone through all new emails, you should have an empty inbox. All emails should either be deleted, actioned or in a subfolder for later attention.
3. Use rules. In Outlook you can create rules that automatically process incoming emails for you, for instance moving all emails where you're just a CC recipient to a separate folder. In Outlook 2013 the rules button is located on the Home ribbon and it lets you create a rule based on a current message or manage rules from scratch. Certain rules (depending on the conditions you set on the rule) can be processed on the server in which case emails matching your rule will already have been moved to the appropriate location before you even open Outlook.
4. Work with your work mates. If at all possible, lay down some ground rules amongst your staff as to what should and what shouldn't be in email. Funny videos of cats jumping are probably best shared on Facebook, not via email. And if you can, agree on what to put into the subject line. One business I know uses AR: for Action Required, so that the recipient knows that there's something they have to do in the email as opposed to FYI:.
5. Use CC sparingly. If someone really needs to be privy to a conversation between you and someone else (but are not required to take action) "CC'ing them in" can be appropriate. But always adding the whole team to every email just in case isn't improving productivity, it just gives everyone more stuff to read to figure out if it's actually important for them to do something with.
6. Unsubscribe from newsletters (except this one of course ☺). If that emailing list that you subscribed to a while ago isn't useful any longer, unsubscribe. It might take a tiny bit longer than the second it takes to hit delete once a week but that time soon builds up.
7. If your inbox is choked with spam please contact us so that we can check the settings on your server. A few nasties might slip through the net but if you're getting a lot of spam it's time to tighten the settings.

8. Configure email on your smartphone. This is obvious and probably the most important use for a smartphone (after actually making phone calls). I find email on the phone an excellent way to quickly scroll through emails and deleting the rubbish quickly. If you're not receiving business email on your phone but would like to, please contact [me](#) so we can set that up.
  
9. If you're collaborating on a file / document with others in the office and you want to point your email recipients to the file(s), don't attach them to the document, link to the file instead. If you attach the document there are now two copies, one in the email system and one on the file server. As you make changes and email those on to others multiple versions of the same file is stored on several computers. But if you email the link, everyone is working on the same file on the server. If you're working with someone outside your organisation you do have to attach the file.
  
10. If you have a need to encrypt your communications (remember, an email is like a postcard, anyone along the delivery path can read it) for privacy, that's certainly possible with today's systems, but it takes a bit of configuration up front. Similarly, if you have a need to control what recipients of your documents can do (you can block copy / paste, prevent printing, prevent forwarding and time limit access) this is also possible. It's called Rights Management Services (RMS), previously this required a fair bit of configuration on your server, now it's available as a cloud service. If either of these options are interesting for your business, please contact [me](#).

These are my tips for email, please let me know if you have different ideas or other tips for "managing the flood" – I'll share them in the next newsletter.



### Platform as a Service

Over the last couple of newsletters we've looked at cloud computing, covering Infrastructure as a Service (IaaS) and Software as a Service (SaaS); this time we'll round of the three big "as a Service" with Platforms.

Google, Amazon, Salesforce and Microsoft's Azure are all examples of PaaS providers. The idea here is that you take code that you've written (or had someone write for you) and instead of running it on your own servers, you "rent" servers in the cloud to run it.

The benefit is that you don't need to buy hardware up-front, you can quickly try out your application to see if it works and if it becomes popular, the cloud can scale out. Of course there's a lot more to it than this and all the platforms offer many supporting services to make this as easy as possible. Most industry analysts I read predict that PaaS is the future of custom software development. It's easier than IaaS for new applications as your provider takes care of the hardware, the networking AND the operating system in the servers where your code runs. And it's of course a lot more flexible than having to invest in your own hardware.

In our next newsletter (in the New Year) we'll cover mobile internet connectivity and blogging.



If you have any questions or suggestions for topics you'd like covered in this newsletter, please email [me](#).

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