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We Need To Talk About Outlook

By Mark Costlow

We don't usually devote a whole issue to one email program. But the recent changes to **Outlook**, and those coming in the near future, promise to have an outsized impact on everyone who uses it.

We are of course talking about Microsoft Outlook, the ubiquitous email software that was once part of Microsoft Office and is now included with Windows 11. It is primarily used on Windows computers, but also has versions for Macintosh computers, iPhones, iPads, and Android phones and tablets.

Microsoft has never been great at naming things (unless you think fomenting a certain level of permanent confusion is part of a strategy). They confusingly rebranded their Hotmail service as "**Outlook.com**". We are talking about the **Outlook software**, **not** the similarly-named email service.

History of Outlook

Microsoft has provided email software for as long **as the Internet has existed**. Unlike some companies with 2 or 3 variations of the basic email program, Microsoft's history is **littered with a very long list of email programs** with names like Microsoft Mail, Internet Mail and News, Outlook Express, Entourage, Windows Mail, Windows Live Mail, and Outlook. Outlook is now the "one true email interface" for Microsoft Windows.

Currently there are two main versions of Outlook in play, "Outlook" and "Outlook (new)". The "(new)" version was introduced in 2023 and aims to become the only version of Outlook. As one might guess from a roll-out that is ongoing after over 2 years, things are not going that well.

There is a **laundry list of features missing or broken** in Outlook (new):

- **Only limited support for PST files** (used for archiving, among other things)
- No offline access
- Mail Merge (any integration with other software on your PC is limited)
- Handling of email attachments
- Limited / dysfunctional IMAP support
- Reduced sort / filter functionality

The obvious question is, why would a routine update to a well-established and widely-used program remove features and reduce functionality? The answer is that while this has been presented as an update to an existing program, **it is in fact a replacement of that program with something entirely different**.

Outlook and its predecessors have always been software programs which run locally on your PC. **Outlook (new) is a web application** which has been packaged to look like it is a desktop program. When you run Outlook (new) you are in fact running a web browser window which accesses a single web site, a webmail app made to look somewhat like the traditional Outlook program.

Why Should You Care?

It's just an email app, why does it matter how it's implemented under the hood? For some people, that is the situation, but for many this is a fundamental change in how their email is accessed, stored, and processed, and they were given no warning about the changes.

Let's divert just a little to **explain the technical difference**. In most cases your email resides on an email server which is connected to the Internet, managed by your employer, school, ISP, or other service provider. You access your messages through a program on your device ("email client") which contacts the mail server to check for and download new messages or send outgoing mails.

In the old-old days, the "POP" protocol was used to access mail. It would download all new messages received since the last time you checked. The messages were stored on your computer and removed from the server immediately. Modern systems use a different protocol, "IMAP", which downloads **copies** of the messages, but also leaves them on the server. When you delete a message on your PC, the PC uses IMAP to tell the server to delete that message.

This IMAP arrangement allows you to access your email from several different devices and have them all present a coherent picture of your INBOX. If you delete a message from your phone, it disappears from the PC as well. When you send a message from your PC, your phone has access to it in the "Sent" folder.

Webmail is different. It's an email application that runs on the server, and you access it through a web browser. The messages are never saved on your computer. This is why some features are unavailable in Outlook (new), such as reading your email offline or integrating with other programs on your computer (e.g. mail merge).

Perhaps the biggest difference is one of control. With Outlook (new) your email program can suddenly only talk to a single email provider, Microsoft. **You will never again have a choice in**

who handles your email or how they do it.

When Outlook (new) debuted, it appeared that IMAP support would be included. It was there, although it was quite broken. There were posts on support forums from Microsoft insiders saying the problems would be fixed soon, but they never have been. It has become clear that the intention is to wean all Outlook users off of using any non-Microsoft email services.

Outlook (new) does support certain select "other" email services, including Gmail and Yahoo. What they don't mention very often is that when you use IMAP or Gmail with Outlook (new), **your messages are saved on Microsoft Azure servers**. This is technically necessary to provide the webmail experience with 3rd party email accounts, but means that there's now another copy of your email in another cloud location, whether you intended to have Microsoft handle your email or not. **Microsoft also must save copies of your Gmail or IMAP login credentials**. It's important to recognize that a future data breach at Microsoft would also expose your non-Microsoft mail accounts.

Microsoft currently claims that **most** of your email data is not used for AI training. **Some related data, like your search queries and mailbox actions may be used**, unless you opt-out of "Copilot model training". But, we all know there are cases where large data stewards have not adhered to their self-imposed limitations. We also know these policies are written in sand, and may be changed at the whim of the provider. When they do, the users have little choice but to accept the new terms.

Alternatives

One advantage of Microsoft and Apple incorporating email into their systems as a core feature is that users don't have to pay extra for a feature everybody needs. The downside is they wiped out a **vibrant market of independent alternative software**. Many venerable programs were **either purchased in order to extinguish a competitor, or driven out of the market**.

There are still a handful of quality independent email programs thriving. Here is are a few of them. These all support IMAP so will work with **any email provider you choose**, without storing your credentials or email on a 3rd-party server. These have all been around for over a decade and have good track records.

- **Mailbird**: Windows and Mac, has a Free version, and paid versions with more features. First introduced in 2013, the Mac version debuted in 2024.
- **The Bat!**: Windows-only, first rolled out in 1997. There is a free trial version and the purchase price is pretty reasonable. Known for technical prowess such as managing extremely large inboxes.

- **eM Client**: Versions for Mac, Windows, Android and iOS. It is free on mobile. There is a free tier of the desktop version for Windows and Mac, with paid tiers that have more features, available as a yearly subscription or one-time purchase. It has a vibrant user community and runs a voting system through their forums where users can influence development of new features.
- **Thunderbird**: the most popular free mail client, works on Mac, Windows, Linux, and Android. It's a product of the Mozilla Foundation (makers of the Firefox browser) and first appeared in 2003.

Conclusions

Microsoft is trying hard to make people switch away from the Outlook program to the Outlook (new) web portal, on both Windows and Macs. The app, and sometimes the desktop, are sprinkled with "Try the new Outlook" buttons. **Do Not Click**.

If you do end up on Outlook (new), don't panic. Google "how do I go back to old outlook" and you'll find many walk-throughs and videos leading the way back to the old program. As of spring 2026, this is still possible, but there may come a day that legacy Outlook is abandoned or blocked forever.

The Outlook program was never problem-free. Its frequent mix-ups, confusions, and incomprehensible behavior are a common theme for any email help desk. But it mostly did the right thing for most people most of the time. RIP.

If you want to preserve your ability to connect to any email service, manage your email on your own devices and your own terms, and opt-out of donating your correspondence to someone else's AI monetization scheme, you do have options. The programs listed above represent a **different approach to managing your digital life**. If that appeals to you, give one of them a try and let us know how it works out.

This Month in Ideas & Coffee

- **Mar 11 6pm-7:30pm**: *Phish Proof Founders* hosts a second game of Backdoors and Breaches – fun for all levels.
- **Mar 17 6pm-7:30pm** – *WordPress Work Along* – Questions, ideas, and conversation about WordPress. Bring your laptop!

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