

In-box clever

Roger Collis turns his attention to the problem of managing one's email while out on the road

As every corporate plate-spinner knows, there are two key rules for business travel. Rule number one is never do business in the country you are visiting, but contrive to be on the phone or email to somewhere else. Rule number two is to keep in touch on your own terms, making sure at all times that your far-distant colleagues know you would be in more regular contact if you possibly could.

Business travellers need to make and receive phone calls and email wherever they are in the world; be that waiting at the luggage carousel, in a cab to the airport, or even stepping onto the airport tarmac. Then there is the ability to type and send reports and to download attachments and deal with spreadsheets in such places as hotel rooms and client's offices, with wireless-enabled laptops.

The new generation of smart phones have become more like palmtop computers or personal digital assistants (PDAs), which in turn are becoming more like mobile phones as each category adds features from the other.

Smart phones such as the Nokia range and the Sony Ericsson P900 can send emails and photographs and manage files. The Orange SPV can synchronise Word or Excel files with your PC. Handheld devices such as the Palm Tungsten W and the Handspring Trio with Wi-Fi wireless networking are fusing with smart phones.

Travellers who have become hopelessly addicted to instant email can find it hard to choose from a galaxy of solutions. The Blackberry 7230 wireless handheld I use is a tri-band GSM phone with general packet radio switching (GPRS) that achieves data rates of up to 50 kilobytes per second, like a PC modem. The phone automatically switches to the local network when you arrive somewhere, and you can monitor email from up to 10 mailboxes in around 40 countries without needing to dial up.

It is quite a buzz to check your messages as you stand in line at check-in or sit in a meeting and watch the spam pile up on the screen. But you cannot manage your email; deleted messages do not disappear from your PC back home so you cannot return to an empty mailbox.

Maybe what we need is software that works with whatever device we take on our travels. For

example, take OpenHand Pro, a software package that allows fast, secure access to email anywhere in the world from most palmtops, including Compaq or Hewlett Packard pocket PCs and the

Sony Ericsson P900. You can stay with your current mobile operator and negotiate a separate rate for data transfer.

'The P900 is the Swiss Army Knife of mobile devices,' says Graham Higginson, managing director of OpenHand. 'It's got

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almost everything that the business traveller could want, but without our software it's missing the bottle-opener. By combining the P900 with OpenHand, you can create the ultimate mobile office. OpenHand sits on top of the GPRS data charge from your service provider. We then encrypt the information that comes back and forth from your device to OpenHand.'

He adds: 'Most of our corporate users don't want their email pushed down to them; they get so much of it. With OpenHand you just go and select the mail that you want from the servers: unlike Blackberry, nothing stays on your device. So if you lose it your data is not compromised.'

Then there is Mail2Web, a free internet-based service that allows you to access your email online from anywhere you can access the Web, such as an internet café or hotel screen. There is no need to take a PDA or laptop with you, all you need to do is type in your user-name and password. You can also access via WAP phone at mail2web.com/wap or a wireless-enabled PDA at mail2web.com/pda.

If all you need is access to personal email, Mail2Web offers a fast, feature-rich service. You can reply, forward, delete and compose emails with large attachments from anywhere in the world.

Whatever gizmo you prefer to travel with, Mail2Web is a great back-up system that may save your corporate bacon if everything else turns to toast. ○



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