

# Supporting Outlook Express

*Outlook Express is often seen as the poor relation of Outlook 98 and 2000. However, with Outlook Express being part of Internet Explorer, it is still a very widely used product. We take a look at some of the major problems that users encounter, and offer advice on how to solve them.*

*By Dennis Jarrett*

Microsoft is effectively supporting two different (and in some ways incompatible) email clients, apparently written by different teams at different times. Outlook 98 and 2000 obviously hail from the Office side and are promoted as being fully-fledged PIMs. Outlook Express is more specifically an Internet mail client, and was born alongside Internet Explorer. Indeed, the IE install will probably have put Outlook Express on the majority of Internet-enabled desktops.

Outlook Express is included with Windows 98 but can be added to Win95 or NT by installing Internet Ex-

plorer 4.0 or above. It is a mid-level mail client - not too simple, but with some obvious deficiencies. It isn't documented too well, however, and there are numerous workarounds and tweaks.

## Quick Start

This section looks at some quick routes to getting Outlook Express up and running quickly whenever you need it.

## Messaging From The Desktop

Outlook Express doesn't let you set up a default destination for CC or BCC

copies. But if you use a template you'll be able to include a standard copy-to address line. Similarly, OE doesn't support multiple signatures but you can create several templates with different signatures already inserted.

You can't actually produce a template format for OE messages, but you can generate message copies that do exactly the same job. Fire up Outlook Express, hit Compose New Message, and add any standard text, signatures or stationery you want. Leave the To and Subject lines blank, unless you want to produce a ready-to-go template for a particular destination. Use File/Save As to save the message. Make sure it's saved as Mail (with the .eml suffix). You can save it wherever you want, but putting it directly into the Desktop folder means you don't have to create any shortcuts. Thereafter you can click on the icon (or on a shortcut to it) to open the message form.

## Add OE To ShellNew

There's another way to produce a quick start for an OE message. When you right-click on the Desktop, you get a context menu with several New options. You can add an Outlook Express Mail Message entry to that list. Run Regedit, open HKEY\_CLASSES\_ROOT and go to the .eml folder. Then right-click in the right-hand pane and add a new key named ShellNew. This will appear as a subfolder in the left pane. Click on ShellNew to select it, then right-click again in the righthand pane and select a String Value to add. Name it Command. Click in the value

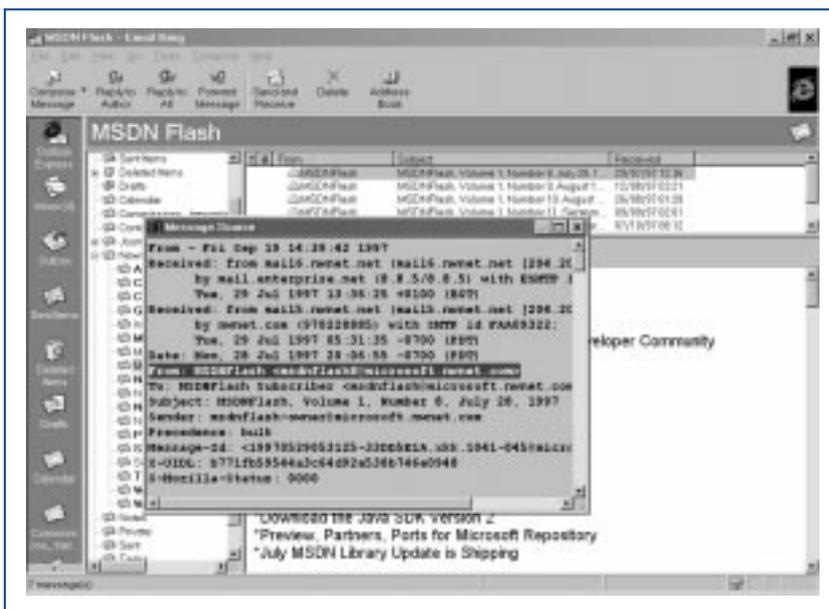


Figure 1 - Press Ctrl-F3 to view message source.

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***“Even if you’ve specified plain text, OE will actually translate incoming messages to HTML before displaying them.”***

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field and add “c:\program files\outlook express\msimn.exe” /mailurl: (including the quote marks). Since the Value is defined by quotes by default, this means your full entry will actually start with two sets of quote marks. You must also have a space after that final colon. And of course you’ll need to enter the correct path to MSIMM.EXE.

The next time that you right-click on your Desktop and select New, you’ll see a new option for Outlook Express Mail Message. Select that and it will fire up the New Message window.

### **Reading Messages**

This section looks at the most efficient ways to read mail.

#### **Automatically Retrieve New Mail**

To set up OE to retrieve new mail automatically, go to Tools/Options/-General and tick the box labelled “Check for new messages every x minutes”. Now go to Tools/Accounts/-Mail/Your Mail Server/Properties/-General and make sure that there is a tick mark next to “Include this account when doing a full Send and Receive”. Then go to Tools/Accounts/Mail/Your Mail Server/Properties/Connection and make sure that all your mail accounts are set to “Connect using my phone line”. Finally, make sure that you have selected “Automatically dial when checking for new messages” and “Hang up when finished sending, receiving or downloading”.

#### **Remote Access**

You can elect to leave the originals of your messages on the server. Go to Tools/Accounts/Mail and click on your mail server’s name. Select Properties/Advanced and tick the box labelled “Leave a copy of messages on server”. It may not work - some servers

(or, more specifically, some ISPs) don’t support this feature - but if available it can be very useful for accessing messages from two different locations.

#### **Threads**

OE doesn’t have the ability to thread messages properly, such that replies and comments are arranged logically in relation to the original message. But there is a partial version of this. Go to the View menu, choose Sort By, and select Group Messages by Subject. You won’t get a graphical family-tree representation of links between messages, but you will probably be able to see which messages relate to each other.

#### **Automatic Replies**

The Inbox Assistant can be used to reply automatically to incoming messages. Set up the procedure via Tools/Inbox Assistant/Add and se-

lect the relevant criteria.

There are a couple of quirks about auto-replies, though. For starters, you can’t test auto-replies to your own email address - OE won’t send a reply to the same address as the sender, a safety measure designed to prevent the creation of continuous reply loops which could bring down your mail server. You will have to find a third party to whom you can send your auto reply message.

Auto-replies follow the settings under Tools/Options/Send. In particular, if you have ticked “Save copy of sent messages” in the “Sent Items” folder you’ll get copies. And obviously you won’t if you have not enabled that option, they will not appear in that folder.

You might also expect that auto-replied messages will be sent immediately if you have also enabled “Send messages immediately” under Tools/Options/Send. But in fact the auto-reply is passed to your Outbox and will not be sent until the next Send and Receive procedure is triggered.

#### **Anonymous Emails**

If you get a message with no indication of the sender, try highlighting the message header and press Ctrl + F3 to show the message source. This should

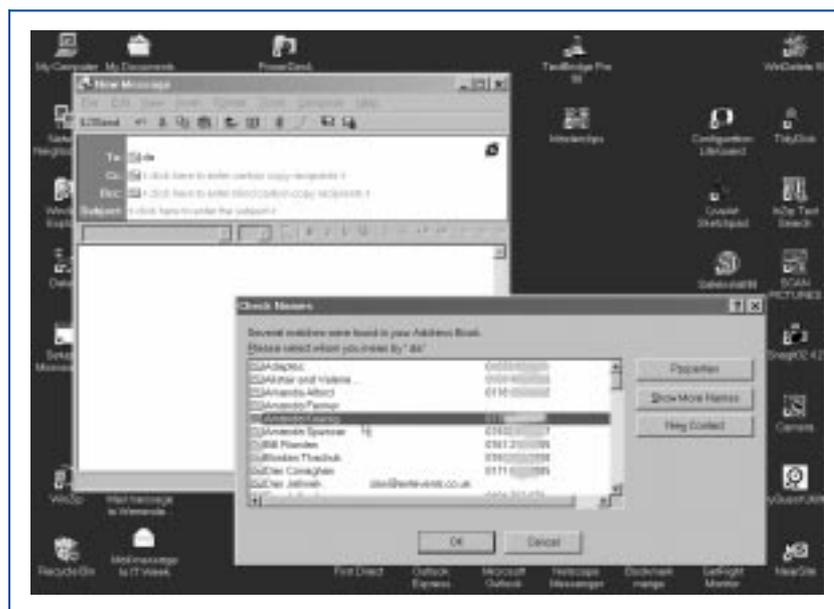


Figure 2 - Automatic address completion.

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at least allow you to determine the email address of the sender.

### Delivery Receipts

Several mail programs can include a request-receipt option. OE doesn’t have this facility. Nor will it return a receipt when another mail program has requested it. This is apparently a quite deliberate decision by the designers.

### Composing Messages

This section offers some tips on how to compose messages quickly and efficiently.

### Quick Formatting

You have the option of displaying a useful Formatting toolbar when you click on Compose Message in Mail or News. In the new-message window, go to View and select the Formatting Toolbar option. You still won’t see the toolbar if you are composing a plain text message, however - it applies only to HTML. Go to Format/Rich Text to switch on HTML mode.

### Address Auto Completion

OE allows users to automatically complete email addresses in the To, CC, or BCC fields. Go to Tools/Options/Send and select “Automatically complete email addresses when composing”. There is one potential drawback with this - OE will always resolve an address when you send the message. So if you enter “All” in the To: field, expecting the message to be sent to all recipients, you might well find that OE resolves the address to Allen or some other name from the address book.

### Quick Address Search

If you have enabled Automatic Completion, you will also have effectively disabled most of the Quick Search options. If auto completion is not enabled you’ll be able to type one or more letters, then press Ctrl-K (or Alt-K - both have the same effect). You’ll then get a list of all address book entries that match the search characters.

### Losing Spaces In Plain Text Messages

Even if you’ve specified plain text, OE will actually translate incoming messages to HTML before displaying them (the message itself is not actually modified, but OE uses the HTML engine for viewing all messages). You

can observe this by pressing Ctrl-F2 to view the source - even a plain-ASCII message will appear to have some HTML formatting.

One useful effect of this is that URLs are highlighted automatically. But be aware that the downsides include the way multiple spaces are compressed into a single space. This can wreak havoc on any careful ASCII-level formatting.

If you want to see the original, unmodified text of the message, you have to view the message source by highlighting the message and using Ctrl-F3. The longer way to the same result is to select File/Properties/Details/-Message Source.

### Attachments

You can’t remove an attachment without deleting the message itself. The workaround is to forward the message to yourself. Before sending it, right-click on the Attachment icon and select Remove.

Version 4 of Outlook Express has a potentially serious security flaw. An email message with an attachment carrying an extra-long filename (more than 256 characters) can cause OE to crash from a buffer overflow. Thereaf-

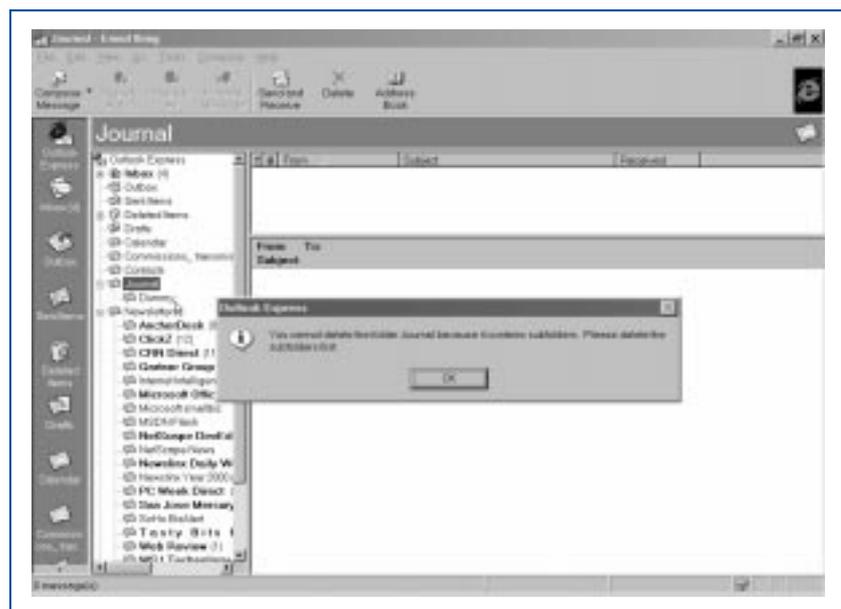


Figure 3 - Deleting folders.

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*“You can elect to leave the originals  
of your messages on the server.  
Go to Tools/Accounts/Mail and click  
on your mail server’s name.”*

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ter your computer could, in theory, be forced to run malicious code actually contained in that filename. Microsoft has posted a patch that removes the problem.

It’s worth upgrading to IE5 to remove this problem and to ensure that you’re running the latest version of Outlook Express.

### **Housekeeping**

By performing occasional housekeeping on a user’s OE installation you can minimise the effects of any future problems.

#### **File Structure**

Outlook Express is a standard database application at heart. Each of its folders actually consists of two files, a .MBX file for data storage and an index in the corresponding .IDX file.

If you choose not to specify a particular location for files during installation of OE, they will usually be set up in C:\Windows\Application Data\Microsoft\Outlook Express. Message folders will generally go into a subdirectory called Mail, and there will be one .MBX and one .IDX file for each OE folder plus a .NCH file that contains the subfolder hierarchy. The News subfolder should contain .NCH files for every newsgroup that you have visited or to which you have subscribed.

#### **Compacting**

When a message is deleted, the Index is changed to remove pointers to the message. But the MBX file isn’t rewritten each time, and can fill up with details of deleted data. Telling OE to compact a folder forces a rewrite so that the .MBX file does match the index. Until that happens, the deleted messages are still readable (open the

.MBX file in any standard text editor). You can force a complete restore by deleting the corresponding .IDX file - next time you start OE it will recreate an index that shows the full contents of the data file as valid messages.

To compact an individual folder, use File/Folder/Compact. That will compact the folder currently active. You can compact all mail folders at once using File/Folder/Compact All Folders.

#### **Backing Up**

Backing up and reinstating mail files is pretty straightforward. Copy all .MBX files into a safe folder, but don’t take the .IDX files. It makes better sense to let OE recreate the indexes, which it will do automatically if it can’t find existing .IDX files.

While you’re in backup mode, you should take a copy of the user’s address book as well. You’ll find that in C:\Windows\Application Data\Microsoft\Address Book if you followed the installation defaults.

To recover an OE message base, or to transfer a new set of messages into OE, copy the .MBX files back into the Mail folder. Before doing that you

might want to transfer existing files into a temporary folder (add a new OE folder by using File/Folder/New Folder - name it something like TEMP, drag and drop messages into it). Delete the local .IDX files and let OE recreate the indexes.

If you’re importing a slightly different collection of folders and subfolders, try removing the FOLDERS.NCH file that you should find in C:\Windows\Application Data\Microsoft\Outlook Express\Mail. This contains the names of the current mail folders and their hierarchy. Delete this file and OE will rebuild the folders from the directory.

#### **Backing Up Inbox Assistant Rules**

To take a copy of a user’s Inbox Assistant rules, you’ll need to back up that section of the Registry. Start Regedit, go to HKEY\_CURRENT\_USER/Software/Microsoft/Outlook Express/Mailbox Rules, and select the Inbox Rules key. From the menu select Registry/Export Registry File. Nominate a name and a location for the file copy to be saved. Make sure that Selected Branch is selected in the Export range, and click Save.

To restore the Inbox Assistant rules, double-click on the saved registry file to merge those values with the active registry.

#### **Moving OE Folders**

If you want to move message files without shifting Outlook Express itself, copy the .MBX files into a new folder. Run Regedit. Go to HKEY\_CURRENT\_USER/Software/Microsoft/Outlook Express and find the

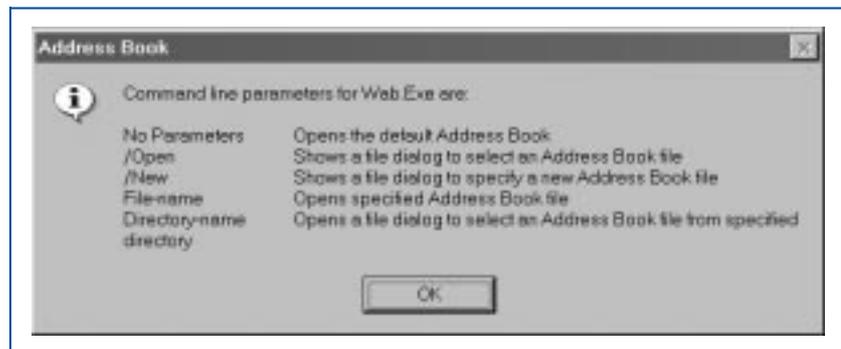


Figure 4 - Multiple address books.

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Store Root string value in the right pane. Double-click on this and type in the path to the new location. Press F5 or View/Refresh and then close Regedit. Restart OE. If your messages are there, you can delete all files from the original location.

This is also the way to set up a shared message space, of course.

## Deleting Folders

There's a safeguard when deleting individual messages from within a folder - using Delete moves the selected message to the "Deleted Items" folder, and until that folder is cleared out or compacted you can still recover the message.

Deleting whole folders can be more dangerous, though. If you select a folder in the Folder List pane and press Delete, you will get a warning message. But it's all too easy to press Enter without due consideration, and deleted folders and their contents are not moved to the "Deleted Items" folder for easy recovery.

There's a crude but effective workaround for double-protecting folders - create a subfolder within them. OE won't let you delete the top-level folder until the empty subfolder has been erased.

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## Saving Mail Messages Outside OE

It's easy enough to save a mail message in any Windows folder - select File/Save As and you get the option of saving in the mail message .EML format (which preserves formatting) or as a .TXT file (which doesn't, but which is thus readable by any text editor). You can't save multiple mail messages using this method - with more than one message selected that option is greyed out and unavailable. You can however use drag and drop to move several mail messages into a Windows Explorer folder.

The messages will be saved as individual .EML files, the name being taken from the Subject field.

## Customising

There are a few ways in which support staff can customise Outlook Express in a corporate environment.

### Disable The OE Splash Screen

To kill the splash screen that pops up every time OE runs, run Regedit and go to HKEY\_CURRENT\_USER/Software/Microsoft/Outlook Express. Right-click somewhere in the right-hand pane. Select New/DWORD Value and name it NoSplash. Now double-click on NoSplash and change the Value Data from 0 to 1. Close the Registry editor and restart Outlook Express. The splash screen will no longer appear.

### Change The Title Bar Text

You can change the text in the OE Title Bar to whatever you want. Run Regedit, go to HKEY\_CURRENT\_USER/Software/Microsoft/Outlook Express and right-click in the right-hand pane. Select New/String Value and call it WindowTitle. Double-click on this and insert your text. Close the Registry editor and restart Outlook Express.

### Multiple Address Books

Outlook Express can use more than one Windows Address Book (WAB),

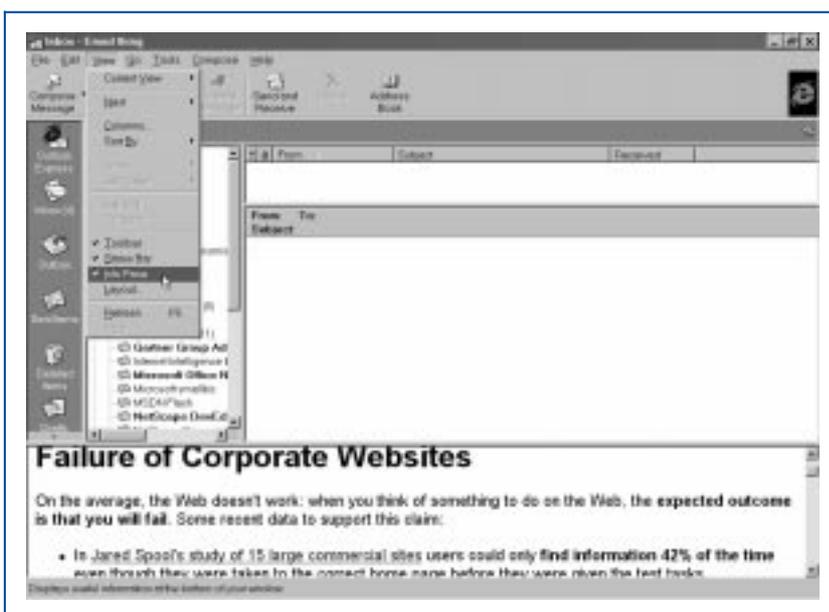


Figure 5 - Creating a fourth pane.

though the feature is undocumented. To create another address book, click on Start/Run and type WAB /new (you can see a full list of the command line parameters available for WAB by entering WAB /? in the Run box). Use the same command parameter to create additional address books.

Subsequently you can navigate to the directory containing your WABs. Double-click on any of the address books to open it. You can now enter (or import) recipient details.

Even if you have multiple WABs available, opening one of them will work only for that one email post. You can set a different default address book for OE to use by editing the registry. Run Regedit and go to HKEY\_CURRENT\_USER/Software/Microsoft/WAB/WAB4/Wab File Name. Double-click on that entry and type or paste the path to a different address book.

#### **Add A Pane**

OE's basic three-pane interface means you can see a list of messages in one window, a summary of messages in another, and the contents of the selected message in the third. You can also add another pane displaying any HTML file, which could for instance list useful Web links or hold a quick-reference document.

It's easy enough to create an HTML file or save one from the Web (IE sometimes omits graphics in such downloads, in which case use IE's File/Send to email the page to yourself - you'll be able to read it in OE, and using File/Save within OE will save the file complete with pictures.

Creating the fourth pane is a registry hack. Run Regedit and go to

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HKEY\_CURRENT\_USER/Software/Microsoft/Outlook Express. Right-click in space on the right-hand pane, then select New and String Value. Type Bodybarpath, press Enter, and right-click on the new Bodybarpath entry. Hit Modify. In the Value Data field, type the path to your HTML file and click OK. Close the Registry Editor.

The next time you start Outlook Express, the View menu should have a new item labelled Info Pane. Click this and your HTML file should appear at the foot of the OE window.

#### **Conclusion**

For users who rely on electronic communications, Microsoft makes things relatively easy and very cheap. The market-leading Web browser, Internet Explorer, is free, as is one of the

most popular Windows-based email clients. Supporting Outlook Express isn't particularly difficult once the system has been set up in a way that is acceptable to user and support person alike. It does, though, pay to keep an eye on users' mailboxes to ensure that they don't get over-full and that important messages are backed up and/or archived on a regular basis.

**PCSA**

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