
Customising Outlook 2000

Outlook is one of the least well understood of the Office apps, and the hardest to support. We present some guidance on making it work the way you, and your users, want it to.

By Mike Lewis

If you support Microsoft's Outlook 2000, you will know that it is much more than a simple email client. With its calendar, contact list, task list, notes folder and journal, Outlook is a sophisticated multi-purpose productivity tool suitable for use either at a personal or workgroup level.

In this article, we'll look at some of the less familiar ways of customising Outlook 2000 and thereby enhancing its functionality. These techniques are in addition to the various customisation features which are common to all Office 2000 applications, such as the ability to use personalised menus and to customise the toolbars (for more information, see *Office 2000: End Users Features*, PCSA Updates 133, 134).

The Outlook Bar

A central feature of Outlook 2000's user interface is the so-called Outlook Bar, that is, the vertical toolbar at the left of the main window (Figure 1). At first glance, this provides little more than a set of buttons for navigating to the various Outlook folders. But with a little modification, it can do quite a lot more.

The Outlook Bar can contain shortcuts to any Outlook folder, to any drive or directory on your local or network file system, or to any Web page. Clicking on the shortcut for a drive or directory gives you a Windows Explorer-style view of the drive or directory's contents. You can use this to navigate to other parts of the file system, launch applications, map network drives, and do any of the other things that you can do in Windows Explorer. Similarly, clicking on a Web page shortcut has the effect of turning Outlook into a mini Web browser. This is useful if you want to give users quick access to, say, a daily news update held on your intranet.

To make the Outlook Bar easier to work with, you can organise the shortcuts into up to 12 groups, with as many items as you like in each group. By default, the bar contains three groups: Outlook Shortcuts (for the seven main built-in personal folders); My Shortcuts (for Drafts, Outbox, Sent Items, Journal and the Outlook Update Web page); and Other, which contains shortcuts for My Computer, My Documents and Favorites. (This arrangement applies to users for whom Outlook is configured with personal folders for Internet mail; with other configurations, the default Outlook Bar might be slightly different.)

To add a new folder or file system shortcut to any of these groups, first select the group, then select Outlook Bar Shortcut from either the context menu or the File/New sub-menu. This will open a dialog like the one in Figure 2. In the Look In control, choose between Outlook or File System. Then use the treeview to navigate to the object (folder, drive, directory etc) in question. You can also create shortcuts by dragging items from the folder list.

Resources

Go to the Office 2000 Resource Kit site at <http://www.microsoft.com/office/ork/2000/Appndx/toolbox.htm> to obtain the documents mentioned in this article. For OUTLOOKBAR.DOC, follow the link to Outlook Bar Reference Information. For the Outlook Today files, follow the link to Outlook Today Information, then click on OUTTODAY.EXE to download the document, and on OUTEXMPL.EXE to obtain the source files and examples. Note that none of these files is present on the CD-ROM which accompanies the printed version of the Resource Kit.

The procedure for creating Web page shortcuts is slightly different. Start by navigating to the required page, either by selecting it from the Favorites menu or typing its URL in the address box in the Web toolbar. Once the page is visible, select "Outlook bar shortcut to Web page" from either the Outlook Bar's context menu or the File/New sub-menu. Unlike with the other types of shortcut, a shortcut to a Web page will always appear in the My Shortcuts group.

As well as adding new shortcuts, you can delete and rename existing shortcuts. You can also add, delete and rename any of the groups. These options are all available from the context menus of the Outlook Bar or the individual shortcuts. In addition, you can use drag-and-drop to move shortcuts within groups or between groups.

Distributing A Custom Outlook Bar

All the Outlook Bar customisation details are held in a file with the extension FAV, usually in the Application Data\Microsoft\Outlook directory. (The filename depends on the user's mail configuration and the user profile name, if any.) You can back up a customised Outlook Bar by copying this file, and you can delete the file if you want to restore the default settings. (Another way of restoring the defaults is to add /ResetOutlookBar to the command which launches Outlook.)

Unfortunately you cannot distribute a FAV file to other users as its contents varies according to the user's mail configuration. However, there is another file, named OUTLBAR.INF (in the Microsoft Office\Office\1033 directory), which contains the default settings for the Outlook Bar. So if you want to distribute a custom bar, you could edit the INF file to reflect your preferred settings, copy it to the users' workstations, and have the users delete their existing FAV files. When they next launch Outlook, the program will use the INF file to rebuild the Outlook Bar with the custom settings.

Alternatively, if you haven't yet deployed Outlook, you could place your edited OUTLBAR.INF in your administrative installation point. It will then be used for building the initial Outlook Bar on the users' computers.

OUTLBAR.INF is a plain text file with a fairly obvious layout. For more information on its contents, see OUTLOOKBAR.DOC in the Office 2000 Resource Kit.

Launching Outlook

Normally, when you launch Outlook 2000, the program takes you straight to your inbox. From there it's an easy matter to navigate to another folder - you simply click on the relevant Outlook Bar shortcut. However, some users might prefer Outlook to always start in a specific folder, such as their task list or calendar.

You can achieve this by opening the Tools/Options dialog, clicking on the Other tab, pressing the Advanced Options button and choosing a startup folder from the drop-down list. Alternatively, you can add a switch to the command which launches Outlook. The advantage of the command-line switch is that it lets you choose any folder, either in Outlook itself or in your file system; the Options dialog only lets you choose one of the built-in folders.

The switch in question consists of "/select" followed by the path and name of the relevant folder (you should place quotes round the path/folder name if this include spaces).

Other startup switches let you launch specific Outlook windows. For example, by adding /c ipm.contact you tell Outlook to start with a window open for entering a new contact. This window will appear on its own, without the full Outlook user interface, and it will do so whether or not Outlook is already running. You could use this technique to give users a set of shortcuts, each with a different start-up switch, to let them easily create a new contact, task, mail message or whatever without opening the main Outlook window. For a full list of startup switches, see Figure 3.

Outlook Today

Instead of launching Outlook 2000 in a specific folder such as the inbox or task list, some users might prefer to start in Outlook Today. This page provides a useful

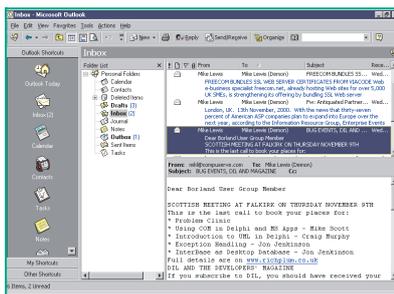


Figure 1 - The main Outlook 2000 window, with the Outlook Bar to the left.

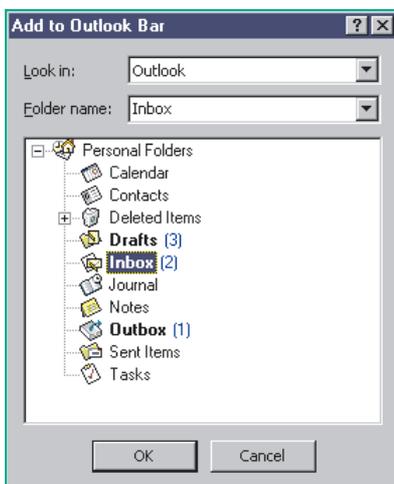


Figure 2 - Adding shortcuts to the Outlook Bar.

Switch	Action
/folder	Turns off the Folders pane and the Outlook Bar
/select path	Launches Outlook in the specified folder
/folder name	
/c ipm.note	Creates an e-mail message
/c ipm.post	Creates a post
/c ipm.appointment	Creates an appointment
/c ipm.task	Creates a task
/c ipm.contact	Creates a contact
/c ipm.activity	Creates a journal entry
/c ipm.stickynote	Creates a note
/checkclient	Prompts for default e-mail, news and contacts manager
/a path/file name	Creates a mail message with the specified file as an attachment
/CleanFreeBusy	Cleans and regenerates free/busy information
/CleanFinders	Removes saved searches from the Exchange Server store
/CleanReminders	Cleans and regenerates reminders
/CleanViews	Restores default views
/Recycle	Starts in the existing Outlook window, if any
/ResetFolders	Restores missing folders for the default delivery location
/ResetOutlookBar	Rebuilds the Outlook Bar
/NoPreview	Turns off the Preview Pane and removes the option from the View Menu
/CleanSchedPlus	Deletes Schedule Plus data from the server and allows information from the Outlook Calendar to be viewed by Schedule Plus users
/Safe	Launches Outlook without extensions, preview or toolbar customisations

Figure 3 - Outlook 2000 startup switches.

at-a-glance overview of the user's current activities (see Figure 4). In particular it shows all calendar items for the next few days, all outstanding tasks, and the number of messages in the inbox, outbox and drafts folders respectively. These items are all hyperlinks so you can click on, say, a calendar item to go straight to the corresponding appointment window.

If you want the program to always start in Outlook Today, you don't have to go to the trouble of adding a switch to the command line. Instead, click on "Customize Outlook Today" at the top of the page and enable the option labelled "When starting, go directly to Outlook Today". If you subsequently launch Outlook from a shortcut which includes the /select switch in its command line, this will override the Outlook Today setting.

The Customize Outlook Today screen also lets you make the following choices:

- The folders for which item counts are to be displayed.
- The number of days ahead to show calendar items (default: 5; range: 1 - 7).
- Whether to show all tasks or just today's tasks, and how they should be sorted.
- The style of the page, that is, its layout, colours etc. You choose from a list of five pre-defined styles: Standard, Standard One-Column, Standard Two-Column, Summer and Winter.

Having made your choices, be sure to click on Save Changes. If you don't, settings will be lost without warning when you navigate away from the page. Be aware too of a quirk in the Winter style. In this case, the option to reach the customisation page does not appear in its usual place on the pane title, but is displayed in small print at the very bottom of the page. It is easy to miss it.

Unlike the Outlook Bar settings, all the customisation settings for Outlook Today are stored in the Registry. This means that you can easily distribute a customised Outlook Today to multiple users. You can do this either by exporting the relevant Registry entries to a REG file, using the Office 2000 Profile Wizard, or, if you have not yet deployed Outlook 2000, specifying the appropriate settings in step 10 of the Custom Installation Wizard.

The relevant settings are stored in the Registry key, HKEY_CURRENT_USER\Software\Microsoft\Office\9.0\Outlook\Today. Figure 5 gives more details. The Folders sub-key contains a simple numbered list of the folders for which Outlook



Figure 4 - Outlook Today.

Value	Meaning
CalDays	Number of days ahead for which to show Calendar items
CustomURL	The name or URL of an HTML page for the current built-in style (case-sensitive)
IncNoDueDate	Include tasks with no due date
Sort1	First sort key for task list
Sort1Asc	If true, sort on Sort1 in ascending sequence
Sort2	Second sort key for task list
Sort2Asc	If true, sort on Sort2 in ascending sequence
Style	Name of current built-in style
TaskFilter	Says whether to show all tasks ("All") or just today's tasks ("Today")
URL	URL of user-defined style (case-sensitive); overrides CustomURL
Folders	Sub-key containing list of folders for which message counts are displayed (see main text)

Figure 5 - Registry entries for customising Outlook Today.

Today will display item counts. In each case, the folder number (which starts from zero) is held as the item name, and the folder name as the value.

Building Your Own Styles

The choice you make in the Styles setting in the Customize Outlook Today page affects the fonts, colours and layout of Outlook Today. But it doesn't let you change the underlying structure of the page in any way. The actual information that the user sees will be the same, regardless of which style you choose.

However, it is also possible to create your own Outlook Today styles. These let you display almost any information you like. The underlying structure of Outlook Today is an HTML page, and this can contain whatever text, graphics and hyperlinks you want to add to it - as well as shortcuts to Outlook folders. More interestingly, it can also contain client-side script and even ActiveX controls, which means that, with a little effort, you can turn Outlook Today into a mini application in its own right.

Unfortunately, the method of creating a custom Outlook Today page is quite complicated. Although the file is essentially a standard HTML page, there are some important rules and constraints that you need to be aware of, and various conventions to observe when you create the page. Full details can be found in a 26-page document, available from the Office 2000 Resource Kit site. This site also lets you download the required source files and some examples (see the Resources box for details).

Once you have created your custom Outlook Today page, making it available to the users is relatively simple. The easiest approach is to upload it to an intranet server, and then place its URL in the URL value of the registry key (on the users' computers) described in Figure 5 (keep in mind that this is case-sensitive). This will override your selected built-in style, that is, the value in the CustomURL setting.

“The choice you make in the Styles setting in the Customize Outlook Today page affects the fonts, colours and layout of Outlook Today. But it doesn't let you change the underlying structure of the page in any way.”

Conclusions

These various ways of customising Outlook 2000 can add some worthwhile functionality to what is already a very useful application. But these are just a start - I haven't mentioned the many possibilities for customisation opened up by VBA, for example. Taken together, these techniques can make Outlook 2000 an even productive tool than it already is.

PCNA

Copyright ITP, 2002

New Reviews from [Tech Support Alert](#)

[Anti-Trojan Software Reviews](#)

A detailed review of six of the best anti trojan software programs. Two products were impressive with a clear gap between these and other contenders in their ability to detect and remove dangerous modern trojans.

[Inkjet Printer Cartridge Suppliers](#)

Everyone gets inundated by hundreds of ads for inkjet printer cartridges, all claiming to be the cheapest or best. But which vendor do you believe? Our editors decided to put them to the test by anonymously buying printer cartridges and testing them in our office inkjet printers. Many suppliers disappointed but we came up with several web sites that offer good quality cheap inkjet cartridges with impressive customer service.

[Windows Backup Software](#)

In this review we looked at 18 different backup software products for home or SOHO use. In the end we could only recommend six though only two were good enough to get our "Editor's Choice" award

[The 46 Best Freeware Programs](#)

There are many free utilities that perform as well or better than expensive commercial products. Our Editor Ian Richards picks out his selection of the very best freeware programs and he comes up with some real gems.