

Flu Virus fixes Microsoft Outlook problems and Optimises Email. By JPS 6/1/07.

Recently I was laid up by the (man)Flu virus, and had to take a few days off work. During this time I thought it was time to take a look at my email system with a view to tidying it up properly once and for all. Microsoft Outlook is by far the most popular non-Web mail system but suffers from problems if good house keeping is neglected. Here are a few notes of my problems and how I fixed them, as well as some house keeping tips and best practice backup strategies.

I have noticed in my travels over the last 20 years we all suffer from lethargy as far as tidying up our inbox and sent items, not to mention the fact that WE ALL DON'T BACKUP OUR DATA REGULARLY!! These issues combined with the growing problem of email SPAM and the fact that Microsoft Outlook database files are inherently fragile, especially as they get larger, making this a real issue for all of us to address seriously.

Below are a number of my personal recommendations of how to manage your Microsoft Outlook to avoid tears if your laptop hard disk fails or Outlook just plain won't open one day.

Upgrade to Microsoft Outlook 2003. Apart from the fact it is the latest useable version of Outlook it has several benefits over previous versions. It is by far the most stable version of MS Outlook. It has the best Junk Email Filter available in my humble opinion. Free updates to this filter are available from Microsoft Office Update web site. If you are an Outlook Express user you will get enormous benefits from upgrading to a proper email system. If you use previous versions of Outlook you will see the benefits of a great Junk Email filter that actually works!! You can obtain the upgrade from pconsultancy.com and if you need help installing it just drop us an email.

Apply the latest patches and Junk email filters from Microsoft. Just go to the Microsoft Office Update page at:

<http://office.microsoft.com/en-gb/downloads/maincatalog.aspx>

It will ask you to download and install a few ActiveX controls if this is the first time you have visited this page. Just follow the instructions. If you need help with this please email us. You can also download the latest Microsoft Junk Email Filter from the Outlook folder on our private FTP server.

Once in operation SPAM emails are automatically thrown into the Junk email folder for you to review and delete periodically as required. You could make an Outlook rule to regularly 'prune' the junk email file automatically.

Back Up Outlook REGULARLY!! Outlook is a database and just like all other databases as it gets older and larger it has more chance of becoming corrupt. Also it is just as vulnerable as the rest of your data (See the end of this document for

recommendations on a good backup strategy). Believe it or not this can also help Outlook users who are connected to an Exchange server. You may sit there all confident that your email is managed by an all singing all dancing Exchange server but I can assure you it is probably the most difficult database to recover from corruption or hardware failure. It is really easy to backup MS Outlook if you follow these instructions, and in the event of failure you are only minutes away from getting back to your last backup point.

Open Outlook – File – Import and Export – Export to a file, Next – Personal Folder File (.pst), Next – highlight Personal Folders (at the top) and check the box Include Subfolders, Next – use the Browse button to choose the location of your backup (I suggest you store it under My Documents), Finish – You will now get the option to encrypt and password protect your backup file if you wish, OK.

Once you have done this a few times it becomes easy. It does take some time and I suggest you do it at lunch time or leave it running after work. I suggest you do this once a week at minimum!! Don't try to export to a network drive over a WiFi connection. It is far less reliable. My suggestion is export to your local My Documents folder and then copy/move the file to your backup drive. You will need to close Outlook before you copy/move the backup file as Outlook seems to hold this file open.

Delete Old Messages. We are all guilty of poor house keeping with our emails. We seem to treat Outlook as a limitless store for all our messages however important. The fact is that Outlook does have limits. It has a limit of 2GB database size. In addition as your database gets bigger it gets fragmented which decreases performance and increases the risk of corruption. If you delete old or unwanted messages regularly it is not too much of a chore. If however like me you can't remember the last time you deleted all those funny video files from your sent items folder it may take a few hours! Be as ruthless as you can, this is very much a case of less is more. Just as an example, here is the difference I made to my outlook this week:

Deletion:	Inbox Messages	Sent Items	PST/database size.
Before	>3500	>4000	1.54GB
After	650	619	531MB*

* after compression – see below.

Before deletion my 1.54GB email database was fragmented into 97 pieces seriously impacting the performance of my Outlook.

Compression. I was very disappointed when after all my efforts at deleting unwanted messages resulted in a database file exactly the same size as it was before. This is because the deleted message space still sits in the database file until you compress it. This seems to remove all the deleted message space as well as the fragmentation so again is well worth doing once in a while.

Open Outlook – File – Data File Management – Settings – Compact Now.

This is another process that will take some time. In the above example the compression took about 2 hours! I suspect however, done regularly will make this an over lunch hour job.

Corruption. This is more common than you think. I would guess that almost all of you have some sort of corruption in your Outlook database file. If you suspect this is the case you can use the SCANPST tool to check your database file. This tool can be

downloaded from our FTP server. When running this tool you will need to locate your Outlook database file. As an example this is where mine was:

C:\Documents and Settings\Julian Silver\Local Settings\Application Data\Microsoft\Outlook

Failing that you can locate the path of your database file in the compression step above. Once SCANPST has found your problems it will save a backup of your database file and then write a fixed version. Open outlook and test it thoroughly before you delete the backup version of the database.

Defrag. Although this is not strictly an Outlook tool it does go through the whole disk and defragment all the files it can. It did not however attempt to defragment my Outlook database file until I had compressed it. It did helpfully point out the files it did not attempt to defragment and how big those were and where they were located. This is a useful tool to run on a monthly basis or after you have had a good clean out. Start – All Programs – Accessories – System Tools – Defrag.

A good backup strategy. This is probably the most overlooked area of computing without exception. The simple question you have to ask yourself is ‘how much data can I afford to lose?’ If it is a weeks worth of data then you **MUST** backup your data weekly. If you would be reduced to tears by losing everything you did yesterday then you need to consider a more regular option. It is as simple as that.

The next question is what do we backup? If you like me store most of your data under My Documents and export your Outlook to your My Documents folder it is reasonably easy. There are a couple of areas you also need to look at. I keep backup copies of my web sites in the root of the C drive. In my case that is C:\websitename. Etc. Also some camera and music software packages store pictures in strange folders outside the My Documents file hierarchy. Don’t miss out your accounts data! Often overlooked are files and folders stored on your desktop. These files do not fall under the My Documents umbrella. Finally how stuffed would you be if your Favourites from Internet Explorer went missing? This can be found at:

C:\Documents and Settings\Julian Silver\Favorites - in my case.

To simplify things try to keep everything under My Documents. Once you know where everything is you just need to copy it elsewhere.

There are a couple of options of where to back up your data to. My current favourites are an external USB attached hard disk. I use an 80GB version of this which cost £75 and easily holds all my data twice over. It is self powered too so is really quick and easy to get going. I also use a USB pen drive or Flash Memory stick on my key ring. I use a 1GB version which you can buy for as little as £15 and 4GB versions are now available. If you are lucky enough to have a server in your office then use it!! Don’t forget you work on your company data all day on the server, but all the out-of-hours data under My Documents, your email and/or personal data aren’t backed up. Copy everything across to your server on a weekly basis if you can. **DO NOT ATTEMPT THIS ACROSS A WiFi CONNECTION** unless you have plenty of time to spare! There is no excuse these days as Disk storage is now so cheap @ 20p/GB!! Failing this you can buy a DVD R/W drive for your PC for as little as £35 and backup to DVD at 20p each.

At pconsultancy we can offer backup solutions advice and practical help for all of your needs. Just drop us an email.