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Tools Of The Trade: Fasthosts LiveMail Pro email system

No missed messages, no need for hardware

By Stephen Pritchard

31 October 2004

For small businesses, setting up a reliable and dependable email system is often a headache. For large organisations, running extensive email systems based around Microsoft Exchange or other business email programs can be time consuming and expensive.

Virtually all internet service providers include basic email with their business and consumer services, but these email accounts have limitations, such as small mailbox sizes or restrictions on the number of users. Another disadvantage is that they do not support the collaboration tools that business email systems offer.

Web hosting company Fasthosts has now launched an alternative, which sits between the two established options of using an internet provider's email accounts, and running mail servers in-house.

The company is offering Microsoft Exchange email, but with the software hosted on its servers. Companies can manage the set-up and administration of their email through the internet, and browse messages either using Microsoft Outlook - which is included in the cost - or through web mail.

Microsoft Exchange web mail is an incredibly powerful tool, making it especially useful for businesses whose staff have to travel frequently. All you need to view your emails is a web browser (Livemail Pro works best with Explorer but runs well enough with alternatives such as Apple's Safari) and an internet connection. Users can log on and access their mailboxes, and also share calendars and address books.

Alternatively, Livemail Pro supports access across the web for users running Outlook on their PCs. This gives them the flexibility to work on messages offline - valuable for laptop users, in particular - combined with the security and reliability of keeping messages on a central server. In contrast to running an Exchange server locally, though, the Fasthosts system runs well on almost any internet connection. Not all internet providers allow their customers to run servers, and not every small business would want the expense, and security risks, of doing so

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One of the greatest benefits of Livemail Pro is that it works in an almost identical fashion to a standard Exchange account. Fasthosts also provides an automatic script that IT managers can use to configure their computers, which makes setting up the system very simple indeed.

Admittedly, we encountered some problems when setting up a test account but these were down to the way an ISP had set up an internet domain, rather than to Livemail Pro itself.

It is very hard to fault the way Livemail Pro works on a day-to-day basis. The standard mailbox is 100MB, which should be enough for most people, and users can buy more space if they need it.

Perhaps the only real flaw in the system is that running a hosted, rather than a local, Exchange system makes backup a little more difficult. In effect, users have to back up their own mailboxes - which they should be doing, anyway - but Microsoft Windows Server 2003 offers extensive support for automatic backups. Although Fasthosts has its own backup systems in place to make sure that customers do not lose data, businesses using Livemail Pro will find it necessary to set up policies for archiving mailbox data.

Unless they can rely on their users to do this, they may need to install server and backup software locally. But at current pricing, Livemail Pro would seem a very attractive alternative to buying and running Exchange in house.

THE VERDICT

Fasthosts Livemail Pro email system

Pros: very low cost, no need for in-house hardware

Cons: users need to be religious about backups

Rating: 4.5 out of 5

Price: £64.99 + VAT a year for first user; £5.99 a month for additional Exchange mailboxes

Contact: www.fasthosts.co.uk

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