

# Email, calendars and instant messaging

IT offers many new ways to communicate, both within your business and externally. These methods of communication can improve productivity and help with marketing.

This briefing covers:

- Setting up and using email.
- Shared calendars.
- Instant messaging.
- Business policies.

## 1 Using email

Email allows you to send and receive electronic messages to and from anywhere in the world.

### 1.1 Email is **cheap, convenient and fast**.

- With a broadband connection, email is very cheap.
- Delivery is nearly instantaneous within a company network.
- Transmission over the Internet normally takes a few seconds.

### 1.2 Email is **versatile**.

- You can send plain messages or attach images and other files.
- You can keep a record of emails sent and use delivery receipts to prove a message reached the recipient.

### 1.3 You can use email for **many things** in your business.

- It makes internal communication simpler. Your staff can log in to their email even when away from the office.

- It gives you another way to communicate with customers and suppliers.
- When someone is unavailable, a quick email is often better than a voicemail message, especially when the message involves detailed information.
- Email is a cost-effective marketing channel. Information of all kinds can be distributed to your customers. See **Marketing on the Internet**.
- Email enables you to be more responsive. For instance, you can change the prices in your newsletter quickly because there is no printed material involved.
- Dealing with customer queries by email instead of telephone may reduce your costs.
- Automated emails can keep your customers updated with the status of their orders.

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- Attaching files is a good way of transferring important information.

## 2 Getting email

There are several ways your business can implement email.

### 2.1 Use a free **free online email service**.

- Online email services are accessed through a standard web browser (like Microsoft Internet Explorer).
- Popular online email services include Google Mail ([www.gmail.co.uk](http://www.gmail.co.uk)), Yahoo! Mail ([www.yahoo.co.uk](http://www.yahoo.co.uk)) and Microsoft Hotmail ([www.hotmail.co.uk](http://www.hotmail.co.uk)).

### Email and the law

- A** When you send an email, you are **liable** for its content.
- If your employees make libellous remarks in a private email (or a newsgroup posting), you could face legal action.
  - Emails can be retrieved from the system long after they have been deleted.
- B** It is a good idea to add a **disclaimer** to your emails.
- These usually state that information in your emails is confidential. The legal standing of email disclaimers is debated, but they may deter lawsuits relating to your emails and will provide evidence of your good practice in this area.
- C** There are regulations dealing with an employer's right to **monitor** employees' emails, faxes and phone calls.
- Generally, you can monitor email traffic.
  - You can inspect individual emails for 'specific business purposes'. (See **Website and email law**.)
- D** The use of email for marketing is the focus of **increasing regulation**.
- All unsolicited commercial emails must be clearly identified as such.
  - You cannot send marketing emails to consumers, unincorporated partnerships and sole traders without their prior consent — unless their email address was collected in the course of a previous sale or sale negotiation,

- Using a free address can look unprofessional. You are almost certainly better off purchasing email addresses to use with your domain name (see **2.2**).

### 2.2 Purchase **mailboxes** from your web host.

- If your business does not have a network server, this is probably the best way to get email for your company.
- The company which hosts your website should be able to supply email addresses too. These are often called mailboxes.
- To look professional, ensure your email addresses end in your company domain name. For instance, each member of staff could have `firstname.lastname@companyname.co.uk`.
- Mailboxes can cost as little as £1 a month, but they are often included when you buy space for your business website. See **Your website strategy**.

### 2.3 Use your network server to **set up and manage** email addresses within your business.

- If your business has a network server, this is probably the best way to get email for your company. It allows you to manage all company email internally.
- Your network server acts as a mail server, storing all emails coming in to your business.
- Each employee then connects to the server to send and receive their emails.
- You will need to install mail server software onto your network server.
- Setting up a mail server is a complex task. Your IT supplier or a consultant can help if you lack the necessary experience in house.

### 2.4 There are some **key points** to check when purchasing mailboxes or setting up your server.

- Make sure you have spam protection installed. Without this, your mailboxes will quickly fill with junk email.
- You should also scan all messages for security threats like viruses. See **IT security**.
- Ensure each mailbox is big enough to hold a number of messages (50MB or more). Cheaper email services commonly offer smaller mailboxes.

- Make sure you can log in and access emails over the web. This is called webmail and can be invaluable when out of the office.

### 3 Email management, security and privacy

There are a number of management, security and privacy issues you should be aware of when using email in your business.

**3.1** Emails are usually sent across the Internet in **plain text**. This means they could be intercepted and read.

- The risk is small, but you should use encryption to scramble sensitive data before you send it by email.
- Many email packages allow you to encrypt emails.
- Never ask customers to send sensitive details (like credit card numbers) by email.

**3.2** Email is a common source of **computer virus infections**.

- You should scan all incoming and outgoing emails for security threats.
- Be particularly wary of emails with attachments, if the attachment was unexpected. Do not open suspect attachments.
- See **IT security**.

**3.3** Although it is an excellent communication medium, email can be a **distraction**.

- Make sure employees do not feel they have to reply to every email as soon as it arrives.
- Encourage employees to close down their email software when they have an important task to complete.
- If there is a long or complex message that needs investigation before you can give a proper answer, do not just leave it. Take a few seconds to acknowledge receipt and let the sender know you will reply as soon as possible.

**3.4** Employees may use the email you provide for **personal or inappropriate** messages.

- Set clear boundaries for what level of personal use is acceptable. For instance, you may permit employees to send personal messages when they are on breaks.
- Some emails contain objectionable content which could offend members of staff. Make sure you have clear guidelines

covering the forwarding of messages with questionable content.

- Set up and enforce an email policy. See **An email policy for your employees**.

### 4 Shared calendars

**4.1** Shared calendars make it **easier** to arrange meetings and plan ahead.

- A shared calendar system gives everyone in your business an online diary.
- Each of your employees can record their appointments in their calendar, just like a normal diary.
- However, because the calendars are shared, everyone in your business can see when their colleagues are busy or free.
- This makes booking meetings much easier, because there is no need to confirm with each person.
- Meeting requests can simply be sent and accepted or declined by email.

**4.2** You can run a shared calendar **on your network server**.

- Most shared calendar systems come as part of a complete mail solution.
- The most common shared calendar system for network servers is Microsoft Exchange.
- Other systems are available too, including IBM Lotus Notes and Zimbra.
- Your IT administrator or supplier will need to set up these systems.

**4.3** Alternatively, you can use an **online calendar service**. This option is ideal if you do not have a server in your business.

- Free calendar services such as Google Calendar are available. They are generally accessed through a web browser like Microsoft Internet Explorer.
- Alternatively, you can subscribe to a shared calendar service. The company which hosts your website may be able to provide this.
- Subscription shared calendars are generally paid for monthly. The price depends on the number of users you have.
- With a subscription service, all your diary information is hosted on servers owned by another company. You pay them to access your calendars across the Internet.
- The most common subscription shared calendar is Microsoft Hosted Exchange. The calendar usually comes as part of a complete hosted email service, which is

charged monthly, per user.

**4.4** Although shared calendars are very efficient, **switching** to them can be difficult at first.

- Your employees may find it hard to adjust to recording appointments on the computer instead of in a traditional diary.
- People may be nervous of making the schedules more public. Most calendars have a 'private appointment' option for personal appointments.

## 5 Instant messaging

**5.1** Instant messaging (IM) systems allow you to hold **real-time conversations** online.

- Each person using the system can log in and show themselves as available or busy.
- Everyone has a contact list of other people on the system they know.
- Conversations are usually conducted by typing messages into a window on the screen.
- Messages are sent instantly. Some systems also allow you to hold audio and video conversations too.

**5.2** IM systems are **widely available**.

- Some IM systems work over the Internet. These include Skype, Yahoo! Messenger and Microsoft Live Messenger and are generally free.
- Other systems can be installed on your network for internal use. These include Jabber (also available as an online service), Lotus Sametime and Microsoft Office Communicator. You may have to purchase these solutions.
- If you intend to install an internal IM system, you will need a network server.

**5.3** Your company can see a number of **benefits** from using IM software.

- IM software allows your staff to get answers to simple questions quickly.
- It is an excellent way of keeping in touch with staff who are offsite.
- You may even be able to use IM software as a customer service tool. For instance, you could offer online chat as an alternative to a telephone helpline.

**5.4** However, you need to carefully consider which IM system you use and how you **implement** it.

- Some of your employees may already use IM for personal communication. If you use the same system in your business, it may be hard to tell the difference between personal and business use. See **6**.
- IM can be disruptive, interrupting employees with trivial questions while they are trying to concentrate. You can avoid this to some extent with the software's 'busy' or 'do not disturb' functions.
- Audio and video conversations use considerable bandwidth which could clog your network.

## 6 Management and business policies

When you adopt new communication tools into your business, it is important you communicate how they are to be used.

**6.1 Personal use** of business communication systems can be a real problem.

- Ensure your employees understand when personal use is acceptable.
- For instance, you may allow personal use of email and IM systems during breaks only.

**6.2 Security** is another key issue.

- Most communication systems like email and IM are not guaranteed to be secure.
- You should ensure your employees understand that sensitive information should never be sent unencrypted.
- See **IT security**.

**6.3** There may be situations where you feel use of certain communication systems is **inappropriate**.

- For instance, it may not be acceptable for employees to use email to tell their line manager that they are on sick leave.
- You should communicate any such situations clearly to your employees, through training and business policies.

**6.4** Make sure any new communication systems are fully covered by your company's **guidelines and policies**.

- See **An Internet policy for your employees** and **An email policy for you employees**.

### Further help

There are other Directors' Briefing titles that can help you. These briefings are referred to in the text by name, such as **Setting up a basic IT system**.

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