

# Delivering the e-mail

## Outlook Express competes head-on with more established programs / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

**B**UNDLED INSIDE Microsoft's Internet Explorer 4 is a new killer app that's sure to worry a few e-mail software companies.

The program is Outlook Express, a full-bodied electronic mail system that competes head-on with established e-mail programs like Eudora Pro and Netscape Mail, as well as noncommercial programs like Pegasus and Pine.

I tested the "developers preview" that's free for download on Microsoft's Web site.

Outlook Express provides all the basic functionality that's expected in today's e-mail programs. It can send and receive e-mail that's either plain text or embellished with a variety of fonts and styles.

It has built-in tools for filtering incoming messages — though they aren't as complete as those in Qualcomm's Eudora Pro.

Express also has support for sending and receiving encrypted electronic mail. That's good news for people who are concerned with Internet security. Sending an electronic message on the Internet today is like sending a postcard: Anybody who happens to intercept the message can read its content.

One of the most impressive as-

pects of Outlook Express, though, is its speed. I'm testing the program on a 120 MHz Pentium computer with 32 megabytes of memory. Express is noticeably faster than both Netscape Communicator and Eudora Pro.

And since Express does its Internet communications in the background, I don't have to wait while my mailbox is downloaded or while my long-winded missives are sent.

For all of these praises, though, Outlook Express has its problems.

First, its good user interface is significantly different from those on other Microsoft programs. It has a different toolbar than Microsoft Excel, a different address book from Outlook, and a different word processor than Word.

Although new interfaces create jobs for programmers and trainers, they're tough on users.

Nor does Outlook Express integrate well with other Microsoft Office products. That's strange, considering one of the things that Microsoft is pitching these days is smooth integration among applications. Express is supposed to be able to import its address book from the Microsoft Exchange Personal Address Book, but there is no way to synchronize the two address books, or better yet, just

have a single address book.

You would think that a company like Microsoft could both save money and make things easier for users by using the same software objects in its different programs. Let's hope that the final version of Outlook Express at least uses Word's spell checker so I don't have to go through the trouble of maintaining two separate custom spelling dictionaries.

Express makes it a pain to save copies of your favorite e-mail messages in folders. To save a mail message, Express makes you drag an icon representing the e-mail message from your inbox into another icon representing the particular mail folder that is your destination. That's complicated. Eudora's creator made this oper-

ation much simpler: There is a "Transfer" menu, which allows you to file away the message with a single click-and-drag. Microsoft's programmers are so good at ripping off features from the competition, you would think that they could have copied the "Transfer" menu too. It's not patented.

Express also does a lousy job interacting with Microsoft's other e-mail system — Microsoft Exchange and Outlook. It strips all the pretty fonts, formatting, bold and italics created using Outlook, for example, and sends it all as raw text. Granted, these are problems with both Exchange and Outlook, but they are problems nonetheless.

My biggest complaint about Express is that it stores its mailboxes in a slightly different format than Netscape Communicator and Qualcomm's Eudora. When I complained about this,

Eric Berman, group program manager of Outlook Express said: "I agree there is benefit to using the exact same format, but we've found that ours gives us some nice performance wins and robustness."

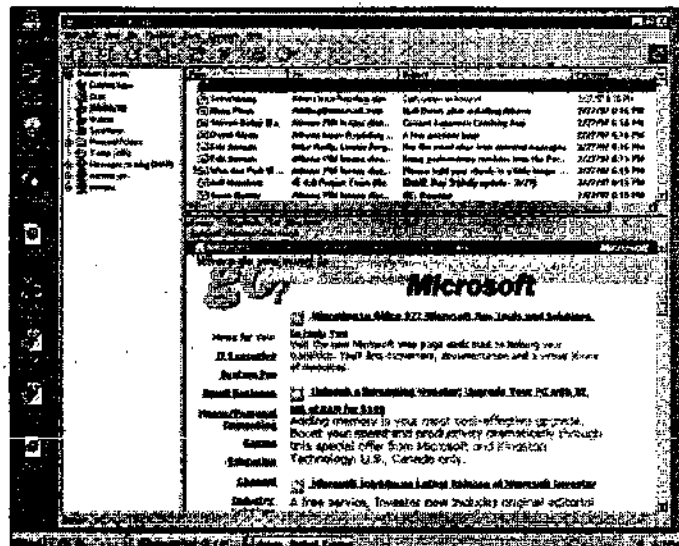
Unfortunately, by making this proprietary change, Microsoft makes it harder for users to move mailboxes from Outlook Express into other mail systems. That's why both Eudora and Netscape Communicator use the standard mailbox format that's been around for more than 15 years.

These few nits won't likely be show-stoppers for Outlook Express. Because the program is free, fast, and offers reasonably secure e-mail encryption, I expect it to dominate on Windows 95 systems by the end of the year. It's also being ported to Macintosh. All of this puts companies like Qualcomm, Netscape, and PGP in very difficult positions.

It's hard to criticize a company for spending millions writing really terrific software and then giving it away.

It's also hard for other e-mail software companies to compete against this strategy. That's why I don't expect to see a lot of new e-mail programs being created by companies after Outlook Express gets a firm footing.

In a way, that's the real problem for users: Microsoft only seems to do really good work when its competing against rival products.



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