

Web Watcher

BY GLENN FLEISHMAN



User unknown

E-MAIL IS A WONDERFUL THING. Thousands of companies use it as a publishing tool. Individuals now pen e-epistles to friends and relatives instead of phoning. Heck, my father's even reported using e-mail to get back in touch with several of his long-lost college buddies.

But one of the great difficulties caused by this personal and professional dependence on e-mail is that circumstances beyond your control can force you to change your e-mail address, with the result that you're suddenly disconnected from the folks who used to know how to reach you. The new services that let you look up people's e-mail addresses compound the problem; often, they have outdated information.

Some solutions are afoot to keep your address constant, but all of them require your participation, the involvement of the people who want to find you, and trust in various entities' continued existence.

You can solve the forwarding address problem in one of five ways.

Get a forwarding address when you move. These addresses can be created at virtually no cost to an Internet service provider (ISP) or former employer, and the forwarding feature of mail-delivery software has been in use for decades. Generally, the system administrator of the

site you formerly received mail at simply creates an entry or a file that has your new e-mail address in it.

Unfortunately, most ISPs will forward mail only for a limited period of time; others won't at all, and this currently includes America Online and all the other commercial online companies. Besides, even if you do have your mail forwarded, you can wind up with a daisy chain of old addresses pointing one to the next.

The second problem is that often you sign up for mailing lists or other services using your existing e-mail address. You can't unsubscribe, in most cases, without direct access to that first address.

Get a virtual address. These addresses forward your mail to wherever you are now. With virtual e-mail companies—pobox (like P.O. Box) and hotmail are examples—you get an address like *yummygooberpea@pobox.com*, and you use a Web-based or similar mechanism to maintain your current e-mail forwarding information.

But you have to worry whether your "permanent" address will indeed be permanent, given that none of these companies has been around for long and given all of the shake-out in the Internet industry.

Get a domain name. Domains are fairly portable, and it's often easy

enough to have mail to a specific address within a domain—or mail to the entire domain—forwarded to a new address. So if you're *glenn@the-fleishmans.com*, you can leave one provider and get "the-fleishmans.com" set up at your new provider.

Go team, go! Some colleges and universities are offering permanent e-mail forwarding, either free or for a small fee—and the service lasts forever! Since the lifetime of many schools is measured in decades or even centuries, this may be an OK option for receiving personal e-mail. My alma mater, Yale University, will give me *glenn_fleishman@alumni.yale.edu* until it goes broke. So, like . . . never. (For any school representatives reading this, such a system is a huge benefit: your alumni are getting a service, so they're more likely to donate money, and you have a direct electronic conduit to them until the end of time.)

Get listed. I've seen several good attempts to collect e-mail addresses and make them available, often along with street addresses. These attempts include Four11 at *www.four11.com*, Switchboard at *www.switchboard.com*, and Accumail (a part of InfoSpace) at *www.accumail.com*. Each of these services lets you add new information or change existing information through some kind of verification: a digital signature, an e-mail reply, etc. This solves the problem of the services listing out-of-date data.

None of these solutions is ideal; each is a compromise. But given the U.S. Postal Service's suggestion that it might be getting into Internet services, like verifying e-mail delivery, perhaps in the future U.S. residents can get addresses like *joe_smith@98112-2629.usps.gov*. ♦

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