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IMAP, YouMAP, WeMAP: Mail Protocol's Proponents Argue for Better Support

By Paul Adams 10.26.07 | 6:30 PM



Ahem, Gmail team: Mark Crispin wants to know when your implementation of his protocol is going to be fully compliant.

Photo: Courtesy of Mark Crispin

With Gmail's adoption of IMAP, one of electronic messaging's best-kept secrets has been thrust suddenly into the spotlight. But IMAP's inventor says the move, while overdue, doesn't deserve the fanfare it received.

Mark Crispin, an often outspoken purist when it comes to e-mail implementations, had a typically-for-him dubious reaction to the announcement of Gmail's added support for his protocol.

"I am very pleased that Gmail intends to adopt IMAP," he says. (Note his word choice: "intends.") "I feel that their current server should be considered to be a 'work in progress' and not as a viable 'ready for prime time' IMAP server."

Crispin says if he were to rate Google's current implementation of [IMAP](#), it would be "quite damning."

"The consequences of the current server being presented as a completed product would be far worse than their not doing IMAP at all."

[Google announced](#) Oct. 24 that it would add support for IMAP to Gmail, one of the most-requested enhancements to its massively popular web-based mail service. Gmail, like similar services from Microsoft and Yahoo, has previously only used the more popular -- but much less useful -- POP protocol.

As with many things Google, Gmail's IMAP implementation is [not quite finished](#). It lacks a few important features, and in our initial tests, we found it to be painfully slow.

When asked to comment on Crispin's criticism, the Gmail team offered an oblique response.

"Our primary focus is on our users and the user experience," a Google spokesperson says, "and we're focused on building the features that are most important to our users. We'll be updating our IMAP implementation as we go, in response to how our users use it and what they request."

However, even non-compliant support for IMAP is encouraging to users like Nancy McGough, who maintains a [list](#) of IMAP e-mail providers, and shares in the frustration of seeing the [22-year-old protocol](#) so marginalized. McGough was losing hope earlier this year. She [posted](#) on comp.mail.imap: "My guess is that (Google, Yahoo and Microsoft) will not (support IMAP). My prediction is that they will support annotating messages and that will be another step towards the death of IMAP."

But now it seems likely instead that Gmail's role as a trendsetter, as well as the proliferation of mobile e-mail, will give IMAP the boost it deserves. Although McGough, a self-described "privacy nut," distrusts Google's motives -- "They want to profile you," she says -- the latest move gives her hope for the future of the medium.

"Now that Gmail is supporting IMAP, I predict that Yahoo Mail and Microsoft will, too," she says.

With POP mail, you're responsible for keeping copies of your messages on your own computer. If you have more than one computer, or a mobile device, you have to manually synchronize everything -- or, more commonly, just live with a disorderly array of inboxes. "I'll just forward that to myself at work" is the battle cry of the POP mail user, a phrase which makes IMAP devotees shake their heads in pity.

With IMAP, everything lives in perfect sync on the server. Flag a message as "to-do" on one machine and the change is reflected everywhere else simultaneously. In an era of mobile devices, POP is a sadly inadequate relic.

E-mail providers have been loath to adopt the superior protocol, in part because it requires a significant storage commitment on the provider's side. With POP, on the other hand, the user carries the burden of keeping all the mail locally.

For ad-driven web-based e-mail like Gmail, there's [another hitch](#). "Companies are worried that, because IMAP syncs so well, users will turn to mail clients rather than the web interface, which means a drop in advertising revenue," says Keith Coleman, product manager of Gmail.

It's a reasonable fear, and Google deserves an optimistic round of applause for taking the leap.

IMAP is unquestionably miles better than POP, but McGough's hopes extend further.

"We need e-mail messages to be linkable, annotatable and access-controlled," she says. "Basically we need all our e-mail in a wiki with multiple levels of access control (private, various groups and public). I think that's going to happen soon. I'll be brave and say within a year!"

Wired News reporter Scott Gilbertson contributed to this story.