



If you can't get attached to email, go for a drive

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Email, truth be known, is a terrible way to transfer files from A to B.

From a purely technical point of view, it was never designed for the task, which is why mailservers get clogged by attachments of only moderate size, why checking mail is so frustrating when a few correspondents have decided to push attached files down your throat whether you wanted them or not, and why documents that should be filed neatly in hard drive folders so often end up jumbled in an email in-tray.

Even if you overcome all that, there's the problem of version control. Try using email to distribute a document under negotiation to several stakeholders through various drafts. Just last week we had to abandon a high-level teleconference when it became clear that different participants were looking at different releases of the contract.

The software gnomes at South River Technologies have fashioned a robust solution to the perils of email document transfer. Here's the model. Fred, Garbett and Heidi work for different organisations, but need to access a common library of documents. Fred sets up a GroupDrive server on a PC visible from the internet, and creates accounts for Garbett and Heidi, each with a user name and password. Send them the address of the machine and their account details, and they can log on through a browser.

What will they see? A web page that looks a little different from Windows Explorer, but works much the same. Folders and files, open and delete buttons, and an option to send an email. And upload and download icons that let them pull a file from the server - if they choose, instead of whenever someone chooses to email it to them - or push files back to it.

Every file or folder has access permissions, and Fred might allow both Garbett and Heidi to see everything in one folder. Maybe there will be some documents for Heidi's eyes only. Set their permissions accordingly, and Heidi alone will see them. We can control who can upload to a folder, download from it, or even see its file listing.

The web interface is great when you're moving between computers and locations. No client software required, save a browser. But there is a GroupDrive client, and it adds a lot to the experience. It downloads in a trice on a broadband connection, and once installed it treats the remote server like a normal Windows hard drive. Save a Word document as p:\project\specs.doc, and without further human intervention it will drop itself on the GroupDrive server - which could be half a world away - and be available for perusal by those with access rights to the "project" folder.

Garbett can, if he chooses, create a secure folder on the server from his end of the wire. It's not just Fred who calls the shots - either of the others can use the server's features as well.

Those gentle readers who may be thinking this sounds terribly like a product we've extolled before - WebDrive - take a bow. Your observation is acute. Another South River offspring, WebDrive lets us map a traditional internet file server - an FTP server in net jargon - to a Windows Explorer drive letter. So the FTP server running on our home PC lets us access its hard drive from work as a normal drive letter.

GroupDrive is the same pony, tricked up to replace the FTP server with the GroupDrive engine. In the process, it adds all those smarts like a web interface, remote administration and file sharing. We have to concede that it's a little complex for a non-techie to set up. But only a little. The online help is sharp, and anyone who really wants to set up an online document exchange won't be beaten.

Best of all is the email bonus. Don't attach files anymore, just email a link from the GroupDrive interface. If your recipient wants the file, and when they want it, they can just visit the link and collect it. If it's been updated in the meantime, they'll receive the latest version. They might even drop the link on their desktop, and double click to see the file as it stands at any given moment. It all makes emailed file transfer look like a very poor cousin.

For more information and a trial version, see <http://www.groupdrive.com>

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