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# GFI's Mail essentials

Jon Honeyball crosses his fingers as he installs GFI's Mail essentials onto his server

It's rare that I allow third-party software onto my core servers: I've had too many bad experiences of incomplete or poorly written software causing havoc. And when you're talking about servers that have to run 24 hours a day, seven days a week with no excuses allowed, it's not acceptable to have even one crash a week. Even one crash every two months would cause me to strip down the server, rebuild and start again. Due to this I like to thoroughly test out server-side software first and only then apply it to my main server systems. Others appear to take the 'slap it on and sort it afterwards' approach to change management, but obviously they're more blessed by the software Good Luck gods than I am.

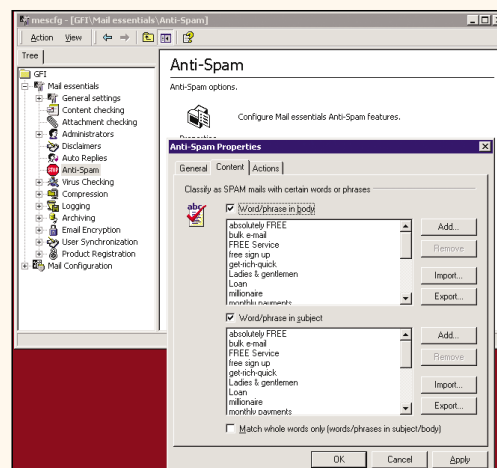
I'm especially paranoid about email and my Exchange Server 2000 boxes. Regular readers will know it was only a few months ago that I actually went live on Exchange Server 2000 for my primary work. My existing Exchange Server 5.5 box was doing excellent work and hadn't glitched in many years, and I kept Exchange Server 2000 on soak test for longer than you'd believe before I took the plunge and moved over. So it was with trepidation that I installed GFI's Mail essentials onto my server. I'd heard good things about this package and was looking forward to a number of the myriad of capabilities it claimed to offer.

Let's look at my list of things I needed in my server. First, I wanted anti-virus checking of incoming and outgoing emails, and this had to work by automatically updating the virus definitions for you via FTP from a central definitions server. Please put your hand up if you think it's

acceptable for a box to be rebooted whenever some AV definitions are updated? There must be many hands waving, because a number of vendors get away with foisting this sort of nonsense on their customers. Next up, I wanted attachment checking, which would examine all the attachments to emails both incoming and outgoing. If it finds any files with extensions like CMD or BAT or EXE, I want them stripped off and thrown into quarantine for detailed examination. The content should be thoroughly checked too, allowing me to remove HTML scripts, block all PGP messages, block emails with certain words in the subject field and so forth. It goes without saying that all of these settings should be adjustable by both group and user.

Plonking a global disclaimer on the bottom of every email I send isn't something I need, but I see the requirement for it everyday at my clients' sites: it might not hold a lot of legal water to attach a disclaimer saying that you're not allowed to read the email that you've just read, but it's better than nothing. It's far more useful to put a standard contact phone number/fax number/email address onto all outgoing emails, for example. Setting up server-side rules for handling autoreplies is something you can do in Outlook if you've beaten your users around the head enough with a large baseball bat. But why not set up autoreplies directly on the server – this would be a useful feature, for sure.

Next on the wanted list is some form of anti-spam protection. I hate receiving all those offers to enlarge my penis or make my breasts more bouncy, especially

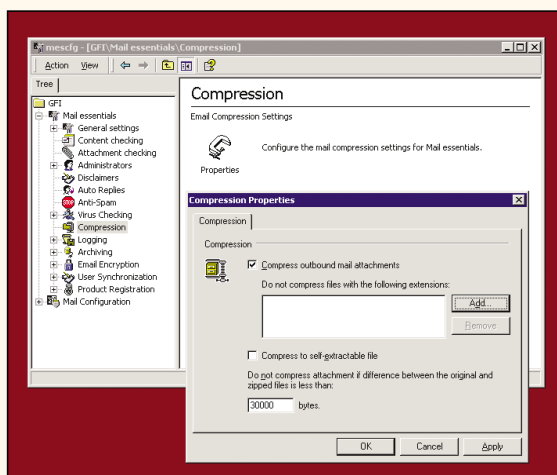


■ Anti-spam features are quite comprehensive and most useful.

when they come from Americans. I'm sure they mean well, but I'm not likely to go to Nevada to have a chest-lift, thank you. A good set of rules with sensible traps would be a godsend. Something else that would be of use to business clients of mine is file compression. Since I have a fast leased line permanently connected to the Internet, I forget that some people have to use modems. These people complain about large file sizes and I'm often forgetful about using WinZip on my attachments. So, a tool that automatically zipped up all attachments would be a help if the total mail size went over a predetermined size limit. Finally, I'd like more flexibility in logging, encryption and a pile of other fiddly things too.

Well, I've news for you. Mail essentials does everything on that list. It installs itself in front of the SMTP service in Exchange Server 2000 and transparently monitors all the email coming in and going out of the server. The only time I notice it doing its work is when it does something I wanted it to do. This might sound a little strange, but some other products can keep tripping you up and getting

in your way. For example, when a client sends me an Excel workbook that has unsigned Visual Basic for Applications macros, GFI's Mail essentials squirrels it away into a hidden place and informs me via an email that this has occurred. I get a neat little Web dialog box asking me if I want to allow this file through, or whether it should strip off the macros and let the rest of the worksheet



■ Ability to compress outgoing emails could be a boon if you have a slow link or the destination uses modems.

through, or just delete the lot. Spam emails just vanish into the ether, although Mail essentials can write them to a disk file for you. I cheat and point it to a subdirectory of the public folders tree in drive M in Exchange Server, so that I can see them using any Outlook client (or OWA client) anywhere in the world, without having to make a drive letter, FTP or Web connection to the storage directory.

So is this product worth going for? Unequivocally yes. There are a number of server-side engines out there and many people swear by lots of them. I'm not going to claim that Mail essentials is the solution to world hunger, but it does wrap up a lot of useful functionality into a workable, stable and straightforward product. As a result of that, I'm pleased it's installed on my servers and I wouldn't want to uninstall it. It's not even terribly expensive – go to [www.gfi.co.uk](http://www.gfi.co.uk) for the latest prices. As an example, 50-mailbox support for Exchange Server 2000 costs £625 plus VAT. Ten users cost £249, making it quite affordable in the Small Business Server marketplace. You get the virus-definition service thrown in for free for the first year, and at £89 for 50 seats would you argue about then buying it for subsequent years? No, I don't think so. ☺

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