

## Google Makes Gmail Available Offline

*Miguel Helft*

The biggest drawback of Web-based software, including e-mail programs like Gmail, Yahoo Mail and Microsoft's Hotmail, is that they don't work when users are offline — say, while on an airplane or on the road without access to a Wi-Fi connection.

On Tuesday evening, Google made Gmail available for offline use, in what the company calls an “experimental feature.”

Google is not the first of the major Web e-mail providers to provide offline access to its service. Yahoo did it last year, though its approach requires users to download a desktop e-mail software program called Zimbra, which Yahoo acquired in 2007. (Zimbra can also be used for offline access to Gmail and AOL Mail.) Microsoft's Windows Live Mail offers limited offline access. And Zoho, a smaller provider of Web e-mail, has provided offline access since October.

Most Web e-mail services have long allowed users to download their messages to desktop clients like Microsoft Outlook via POP or IMAP technology.

But Gmail's new offline feature will allow users to handle their e-mail within the familiar Gmail interface, with automatic synchronization of changes when an Internet connection is available.

Offline access to Gmail from Google has long been expected. In 2007, the company introduced a set of programmer tools called Google Gears, which allow developers to adapt Web programs so they can be used offline. Google has made its blog reading service, Google Reader, and its suite of office software, Google Docs, accessible offline. It has long said that offline access to Gmail was in the works.

The new service will be in the “Labs” section of Gmail, which the company uses to introduce experimental features. And Google warns that users may run into bugs. “Offline Gmail is still an early experimental feature, so don't be surprised if you run into some kinks that haven't been completely ironed out yet,” Andy Palay, a Gmail engineer wrote on a company blog.

But Mr. Palay said the software had worked well inside Google. “We've been using offline Gmail internally at Google for quite a while (I've read thousands of messages and answered hundreds en route to visit my son and my daughter),” he said. “And it's saved me more than once when my home network connection ran into issues (we have squirrels at home that love to chew through outside cable wires).”

Google said offline access to Gmail would be available to users in the United States and Britain over the next couple of days.

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