

More of John's Favorite Programs

Last month's issue of my Top Ten Free Utilities turned out to be quite popular... so here's some more, plus some useful non-utility "cloud" offerings that illustrate how easy it is to begin using a "cloud" service.

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#1: Email – Gmail

If you have had trouble with email services such as AOL, Hotmail, or Yahoo, there is an excellent free option: Google's Gmail. I began using it in late 2006, mostly as a test. I later began using it seriously in mid 2007 solely as a spam filter for my previous email accounts. I set up the account to receive email, pass it through Gmail's excellent spam filters, then dump it back out to my Outlook email reader. Later, I dumped my old Covad.net and SBCglobal.net email accounts entirely and just used Gmail as my primary personal email account. I still filter my business email through Gmail...

Gmail's benefits are much more than just using it as a spam filter... you can receive email from multiple accounts into one Gmail account so it can act like a "funnel" to collect multiple accounts into one place. You can view email online, or in your favorite email program such as Outlook, Outlook Express, Eudora, Entourage, Thunderbird, etc. Of course, since Google has the best search technology, you will be able to find specific emails quickly. The total storage capacity is easily double that of other email accounts: 8GB.

The sole drawback is that Gmail is limited to POP3 or IMAP protocols, which limits the ability to sync email to just inbox, deleted items and sent messages, plus any folders you create. Contacts, tasks and calendars are not part of the synch. Google does have an add-on program to synch everything, but I found it to be buggy and crashes a lot.

#2: Large File Transfers – YouSendIt, DropBox.

If you've ever sent an email with a large attachment that got stuck in your outbox, you know that some files are just too big for email. In general, the total message size limit for most email systems is about 2MB (megabytes). If you have to send a file that is larger, you could use FTP, but the receiver needs to have an FTP server. Enter another "cloud"-type service offering – online temporary storage and file transfer.

<https://www.yousendit.com/> is one of these services. It has a simple interface, you enter your email address, your recipient address, and then click the button to add a file or files from your PC. Also available as a paid service, it is worth the cost if you need to send large files frequently.

<http://www.dropbox.com/> is another file sharing/transfer service. Similar to YouSendIt, it is Free up to 2GB storage, it also allows you to sync files between several devices. If you want to send a large file, simply share one of your DropBox folders, and it will send an email notice to connect your recipient with the online folder.

#3: Web Meetings, Web Conferencing: GoMeetNow

If you need to host an online meeting for a group, you may want to try www.GoMeetNow.com. While not a free product, the cost is very low compared with some of the big-name web conference software such as WebEx.com, or GoToMeeting.com. At \$12.95 per month plus \$1 per attendee, it is a relative bargain. You get desktop and application sharing, a whiteboard feature, and you can display your Webcam, too.

Attendees can dial into a toll number in the GoMeetNow system, or to any other phone number of your choice. GoMeetNow won't be able to handle a cast of thousands, but it is great for groups up to 100 users.

#4: Recover Microsoft Office License Keys: KeyFinder, Bel-Arc Advisor

These products are pretty darn cool. I use both frequently to re-install Microsoft products in certain situations. For example, let's say you just got a new PC. You want to install Office 2007, and you have the CD's, but the package with the license key is long gone. Using KeyFinder or BelArc Advisor, you can recover the license key off your old PC, copy it, and then use it to install on the new PC.

Going a bit further, BelArc Advisor also can inventory your entire PC, listing all installed software, drivers, internal parts, shared folders, printers and more. It even tells you if your PC is up-to-date with security patches. Awesome!

WinKeyFinder: <http://www.winkeyfinder.com/>

Bel-Arc Advisor: http://www.belarc.com/free_download.html

#5: Note-Taking: EverNote, SpringPad

If you are a student or need to collect many random bits of information and keep them organized, you need note-taking software. EverNote combines a local PC or Mac component with an online sync component. SpringPad is completely "up in the cloud" meaning it is online-only.

As such, which you may wish to try depends how you would use it. If you are always connected to the internet, you may want to try SpringPad first. If you travel frequently and are away from internet access, EverNote will function without internet access, then sync when it becomes available.

Beyond that major difference, there are a few more: Evernote assumes notes are private, and you need to explicitly share notes or folders with others. SpringPad takes a different approach, it assumes you may want everyone to see notes, and has only a simple "Public" or "Private" toggle icon for each folder, and allows you to link any item with your Facebook, Twitter or email account... Be careful.

Both have versions for most major smartphone platforms, as well as Microsoft Windows / Apple OS-X.

EverNote: <http://www.evernote.com/>

SpringPad: <http://springpadit.com/>

Summary:

I'd like to thank Gloria Smith (a long-time newsletter reader) for her suggestions of Evernote and DropBox. Please call or email me with any of your favorites for future issues. If you have questions or comments, please contact me by phone or email. As always, many thanks for reading!

-John Becker