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Q: What's the difference between POP and IMAP email settings, and which will work best for my business?

A: There's only one person who can start off a conversation about email protocols by saying, "When I invented email back in 1978 …," and that person is V.A. Shiva Ayyadurai, who holds multiple degrees from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, including a doctorate in computational systems biology. As a high school student, he developed an electronic version of a mail system for interoffice use and copyrighted his program as "Email."

Ayyadurai, founder and president of EchoMail in Cambridge, Mass., sat down with us to explain the differences between Post Office Protocol and Internet Message Access Protocol.

How do POP and IMAP settings differ?

In simple terms, POP and IMAP determine how your incoming mail is moved, saved, deleted and synchronized between the email server and your inbox. POP moves email from the server to your device (PC, tablet, smartphone) when you're accessing email and either saves or deletes it from the server and your inbox. With the IMAP setting, email that is received at your mail server stays there, allowing you to track what is happening in each local inbox.

In other words, POP focuses on the email messages at the inbox on your local device, while IMAP focuses on making sure the email messages on the server and your inboxes are all synchronized.

So how do I know which is best for me?

The settings become relevant when you use non-web-based email programs on devices that connect to an email server. In these cases, email has to be moved from the server to your inbox, which can be found on one device or many. Choose a POP setting if you want to save storage space, need constant access to your email and need to access mail from only one device.

If you're using multiple devices to check and manage email, IMAP is the way to go. IMAP enables users at different locations, using different devices, to manage the same inbox. With IMAP, you can log in from home, work, iPhone or desktop and see the exact same view of your email inbox, since all local inbox changes are synced.

Which setting is the most secure?

Sending email has inherent insecurities, regardless of the setting. With POP, you're storing messages on your device, so you increase the chance of infecting your computer with viruses and malware accompanying downloaded email. With IMAP, all of your messages are stored at the server and, unless they're encrypted, someone could read them. As a

result, neither setting is necessarily more secure, unless you've enabled security settings.

Would I be better off using a webmailapplication like Gmail or Outlook?

Using webmail with mobile-enabled applications and a single inbox eliminates the need to think of IMAP or POP. Webmail is the easiest solution, really, leaving you with more time to think about profit margins rather than email settings. However, make sure you're using a webmail service with a secure sockets layer. (SSL-secured programs begin with "https" instead of "http.") This ensures that information sent between your computer and the web-based email program is encrypted.