whoami@this.address, anyway?

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This is really a primer for those new to e-mail or for those who want to know more about what constitutes an e-mail address. Next month I hope to delve into the intricacies of fighting spam and how to manage your e-mail account.

All valid e-mail addresses take the form of a string of text, punctuated with full-stops (periods for those on the other side of the Pacific), and divided by the symbol '@'.

Text following the '@' symbol is divided into discrete components. By reading each component starting from the far right and working back to the '@' symbol, it is possible to define the final address of the postbox at which a given user receives mail.

On the right we have...

The final component (on the far right) is generally a 2-letter code, such as '.au' or '.ca' or '.uk' — this identifies the country in which the mailbox resides. If the country-of-origin is not shown, one can assume that the country is the United States of America — even though there is also a '.us' country code. The parochialism of the US is such that we won't be seeing a change for some time to come. However, there is a strong push by businesses and organisations that are not affiliated to any one country to not use a defined country code, even though most assume that the business is thus conducted in the United States. A sore point for some.

The next component (reading back toward the '@' symbol) is generally a 3-letter code, such as '.com', '.edu', '.net', '.org' or '.gov', but can confusingly be a 2-letter codes in some countries such as the United Kingdom or Japan ('.co', '.ac' are two examples). This identifies the type of business — '.org' for an organisation, '.mil' for military, '.com' or '.co' for a commercial organisation, and so on.

The next component usually identifies the name of the organisation, such as 'alia' or 'ozemail' or 'nla' — invariably an acronym for the business, but not always.

In some instances, there may be one or more discrete components found as part of the address, such as '...@mailpc.alia.org.au' or '...@biffo.science.une.edu.au' — this signifies that there are further divisions of the organisation that require identification and separation. Large organisations may need a number of different work areas, servers, or mailboxes to cope with the diversity of the business they operate within. Invariably, the final component directly adjacent to the '@' symbol, in these instances, will refer to the name of a particular computer in that division or organisation.

And on the left...

The left-hand side text string identifies a user at the mail location described on the right-hand side. And this is where the fun begins. Depending upon the proficiency of the person responsible for creating such addresses, and the limitations of the software used to create them, each user will have a unique name (or more correctly, 'user' account) that is either a close facsimile of their real name, or some other coded variation. For example, a person with a name of Vladimir Splurgler is likely to be given a 'user' account name of 'vladimir' or 'vlad' or 'vsplurgl' or 's123h56' — it all depends on the system in place and the limitations of that system.

Aliases

Of course, it is sometimes difficult to interpret 's123h56@...' or even 'vlad@...' as anything meaningful in many situations, and in these circumstances experienced and wise mail administrators link these nondescript user account names to aliases of addresses that have more meaning, such as vladimir.splurgler@arnie.real-good.com.au — and in many instances a number of aliases will work, especially if the user's name is frequently misspelt. In addition, aliases may apply on the right-hand side, so that 'arnie.real-good.com.au' may also be linked to 'real-good.com.au' — it really depends on how well the mail administrator has linked all of these things together.

Aliases can be a real life-saver in that it can make sense out of an otherwise difficult-to-fathom naming scheme. For example, all staff at ALIA National Office have addresses in the form of 'firstname.lastname@alia.org.au' (ivan.trundle@alia.org.au), yet each of these is an alias of the real address and the real user's account name. But this is entirely transparent to both the user as a recipient of mail and the user as a sender of mail. An increasing number of mail administrators get it wrong though, and endless difficulties are invariably experienced by users particularly when they attempt to subscribe to electronic discussion lists, which demand verifiable addresses. Over time, though, the situation is improving as more and more mail administrators learn from their mistakes, and from the grumblings of affected users!

As you can see from all of this, each right-hand side component of the address more-closely defines the location of a user's mailbox, whilst the left-hand-side defines the user at that location. There are generally-accepted rules which dictate what letters and numerals can be used — some characters are not permitted at all, such as spaces or apostrophes (apologies to the O'Donovans...). Importantly, case is not an issue for 99.9 per cent of modern e-mail systems: 'VLAD.SPLURGLER@ARNIE.REAL-GOOD.COM.AU' should be treated exactly the same as 'vlad.splurgler@arnie.real-good.com.au' (this will save wear and tear on your shift key). ∎

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