

Vacation Auto-reply

Introduction

This document is intended for both the system administrators who will be asked to setup an email auto-reply for someone and for anyone who wishes to set it up on their own. If you need assistance, feel free to use the Request Support form.

The program vacation is used to send an email auto-reply when someone is away from the office. A small database is setup to ensure that each sender only received the auto-reply once.

Required Information to Setup

When someone requests a email auto-reply, they need to provide 3 things. Those 3 things are the start time, the end time, and the outgoing message. If only the start or end dates (and not times) are given, that's ok. As a rule of thumb, set the start time to be 6:00 PM of the last day the person will be at the office. Set the end time to be 7:00 AM of the day they will return to the office. Some people will give the exact dates and times which makes this decision much easier.

If an outgoing message is not given, that can be requested, or a generic message can be used. Here is a sample generic outgoing message:

I will be out of the office from (START DATE) until (END DATE).I will address your message when I return to the office.
Thanks.

Before you Change Anything

This is good advice if you are setting this up for yourself, but it is especially important when you are setting up an auto-reply for someone else.

Before you do anything, make sure the user does not already have a .forward or a .qmail. Most users who purposefully forward their email will never ask for a email auto-reply. There is plenty of reasons for other users to have a .qmail file though. If the file already exists, you need to either preserve it, or modify it to work with the vacation program. An existing file will require you to treat the automatic enable and disable differently. Use your best judgement and if necessary, ask the user how they want to treat the functionality of their .qmail file while they are gone.

Note: The rest of the document will assume no .qmail or .forward file exists.

Setting Up the Email Auto-reply

Log on as the user

If you are setting up the auto-reply for another user, su to their account. For this example, we will use a fictional user, Alpha B. Charlie, who's username is abc1234 and home directory is /cis/staff/abc1234. The full command, to switch to that user would be su - abc1234. This is best done from root on saturn.

.vacation.qmail

First create, or verify the file .vacation.qmail in their home directory. This file, as that name is not used by either qmail or vacation. As part of its activation, it will be renamed. For the sample user, the file will look like:

```
|/usr/local/bin/vacation abc1234 /cis/staff/abc1234/mailbox
```

Note: Historically the first line would look like: |preline vacation abc1234. This is no longer correct. The vacation program we are using, the one who's path is /usr/local/bin/vacation was designed to work with qmail and will actually break if used with preline.

.vacation.msg

Create a .vacation.msg file that will contain the user's vacation message. The user will usually give the necessary text and it will usually be a matter of a text replacement. The format of the file is 2 header lines, one for the From header and one for the Subj header, a blank line, and the message text. Do NOT forget the blank line after the headers, it's important! A sample .vacation.msg file:

```
From: Alpha B. Charlie <abc1234@cis.rit.edu>Subject: I am away from the office
I am away from the office and to not have access to my email. I will respondafter I return. Thanks.
Alpha B. CharlieTest account who's vacation mail auto-reply should be ignored
```

Vacation Database Initialization

Vacation works with a small database to keep track of who it sent the auto-reply mail to. This is to ensure people do not receive the vacation mail each and every time they send mail to the vacationing user. That would get annoying. Do not forget to initialize the database with the command: `/usr/bin/vacation -l`

Note: To initialize the database, use `/usr/bin/vacation` instead of `/usr/local/bin/vacation`. This will prevent `/usr/local/bin/vacation` from clobbering the `.vacation.qmail` file.

Schedule the Email Auto-reply

The email auto-reply could be enabled or disabled manually. The command to manually enable the auto-reply is:

```
mv .vacation.qmail .qmail
```

and the command to manually disable the auto-reply is:

```
mv .qmail .vacation.qmail
```

Rather than trying to remember to turn on vacation mail on and off, it would be best to schedule the job with `at(1)`. To find out more information, read the `at(1)` man page. To create a scheduled job with `at(1)`, enter the `at` command, and at the `at>` prompt, enter the command(s) and end entering commands with a control-D. You will receive feedback telling what shell will be used to execute the command and what time it will execute. If it does not look right, you need to correct the command and remove the incorrect `at` job.

Let's say, for example, that User `abc1234` wants to turn on his auto-reply at 6:00 PM on February 21 and have it stop at 7:00 AM on February 28. The 2 `at` commands would look like:

```
at 6pm Feb 21 at> mv .vacation.qmail .qmail at> <EOT> commands will be executed using /usr/bin/tcsh job
1140562800.a at Tue Feb 21 18:00:00 2006
and:
```

```
at 7am Feb 28 at> mv .qmail .vacation.qmail at> <EOT> commands will be executed using /usr/bin/tcsh job
1141128001.a at Tue Feb 28 07:00:00 2006
Test It!
```

If you were requested to immediately turn on the email auto-reply, you can test it by sending the user email telling them you enabled it. You'll know it is enabled when you get the auto-reply. If the auto-reply is to be enabled later, still tell the user you enabled it, and test it at a later time if you get the chance.

Alternate Methods of Email Auto-replies

These are included to list alternate ways vacation auto-replies were setup. This is here for historical record.

Preline and Sendmail Version of Vacation

Before we installed Peter's vacation program, we had to use the Solaris sendmail version of vacation. The major difference is that the `.vacation.qmail` from the above example would look like:

```
|preline vacation abc1234 /cis/staff/abc1234/.mailbox
```

When `saturn` was an Alpha, this worked just fine. However, under Solaris, there is the very real potential to cause a loss of mail. Any message over 20KB caused a broken pipe error and therefore the mail was held in the queue. If the user was on vacation for longer than the queue lifetime (1 week), mail was rejected. This is why we went with the other version of the vacation program.

Using a `.forward` file and the Sendmail Version of Vacation

Another method of setting up a email auto-reply is to use a `.forward` file and the Sendmail version of vacation. That program lives at `/usr/bin/vacation` which is really a link to `/usr/ucb/vacation`. To do this, the `.forward` file is setup like:

```
\abc1234, "|/usr/bin/vacation abc1234"
```

The rest of the setup instructions are the same. Note: With this, there is no `.vacation.qmail` file. You could instead have `.forward` saved as `.vacation.forward` when it is not in use.

The only people who will use this method are the ones who know how to do it themselves. This method does not have the risk of mail loss seen with preline and the Sendmail vacation program.