

POP vs IMAP

POP stands for *Post Office Protocol* and IMAP is short for *Internet Message Access Protocol*. They are both email protocols allowing you to read emails using one of the many available email clients.

POP was the original protocol created in the early 1980s to download emails from a remote server. IMAP appeared a couple of years later allowing access to view emails stored on a remote server. POP downloads emails from the server to permanent local storage, whilst IMAP can leave them on the server just storing emails locally temporarily or permanently if required. You could say that IMAP was one of the first protocols to effectively demonstrate the viability of cloud storage.

POP & IMAP

How do the two protocols work?

Each requires an email client and these are usually capable of using either protocol.

POP:

- Connect to server
- Retrieve email
- Store locally
- Delete mail from server (can leave a server copy even if deleted locally)
- Disconnect

IMAP:

- Connect to server
- Retrieve email and store it locally temporarily e.g. new mail, message headers, or full content of selected emails.
- Process edits, e.g. mark as read, saves replies, delete, move to other folder etc. and update the server with this information for future reference.
- Disconnect

Advantages Of POP

The basic idea of POP is that usually only one client requires access to mail on the server and that emails are best stored locally. This leads to the following advantages:

- Mail stored locally, i.e. always accessible, even without internet connection
- Internet connection needed only for sending and receiving mail
- Saves server storage space
- Option to leave copy of mail on server for access from multiple locations or users

Advantages Of IMAP

IMAP allows remote access to emails stored on a remote server. This allows multiple users to access a single inbox. Logging in from your home or your work computer, will always allow you to see the same emails and folder structure as they are stored on the server and all changes you make to local copies are updated to the server. Consequently IMAP has the following advantages:

- Stored on remote server, i.e. accessible from multiple locations and users
- Can provide a quicker overview as optionally only headers are downloaded until content is explicitly requested
- Mail can be automatically backed up on a well managed server.
- Can save local storage space if the option to store mail locally is not used.

Should I choose POP or IMAP?

This will depend on your environment and will change with your requirements. The reality is that with modern email clients you can effectively choose either and have almost the same result. One major factor in favour of IMAP is the replication of your folder structure on whichever device you use. To achieve this with POP requires that each folder is duplicated manually and emails are not moved to folders without individual intervention on each device. Here are some points to help you decide:

POP

- You need access your mail from a single device and local storage space is not an issue.
- Access to your email is required regardless of your internet connection state.
- Server storage space is limited.
- Local backups are not a problem.

IMAP

- Access to your email from multiple locations or users.
- Your internet connection is consistent.
- You can quickly see an overview of new or old emails on the server
- Local storage space is limited.
- Sufficient server storage space is available
- You don't want to worry about backing up emails locally.

If you are not sure choose IMAP. Your provider is unlikely to offer this option if server space is an issue and it can be configured to behave exactly like POP by using the option to store your mail locally and as a bonus your email is usually automatically backed up on the server. There is very little reason to choose POP unless you are using an email server with limited storage.