STC Network Systems
Web Site Services & Consulting

Dealing with Microsoft®’s “winmail.dat” Attachments

by Michael Foster, STC Network Systems

Attachment Problem

Users sometimes find that they have received e-mail messages with a strange file attached called ***winmail.dat***. When they attempt to view this file, either it can't be opened at all, or it contains "garbage" data.

People using several different e-mail client programs cause this, whether to receive, read or send e-mail. The most commonly used e-mail client programs seem to be either some version Microsoft® Office/Outlook/Outlook Express™, a Web browser, or – in use by a lot of the more technical types -- Eudora and Thunderbird.

However the attachment problem has been traced to Microsoft® products, specifically Outlook™.

Microsoft® does not "play nice" with non-Microsoft® programs. So anyone using Netscape, Firefox, Chrome, Safari or Konqueror browsers to read their mail -- and those who use Eudora, Pegasus or Thunderbird as a stand-alone e-mail client program -- are subject to receiving both e-mails and attachments as Windows Mail Data files (**winmail.dat**).

There are two ways to correct this: one for the ***sender*** and one for the ***recipient*** (see below). For anyone who receives winmail.dat (or some variation of that name: **winmail2.dat**, **winmail34.dat**, **ATT00001.dat**, etc.), it is because a person uses Outlook™ to send e-mails, but the intended recipient doesn't use it to read them.

Outlook™ is a powerful and popular (with business) e-mail client program with a number of features that look very attractive. Most notably, Outlook™ allows users to send e-mail in a variety of formats:

- as plain vanilla text with no formatting
- in Rich Text Format, which allows for a limited amount of formatting, such as boldface/italic/underlined text or different fonts
- formatted with the HTML formatting language so that it appears somewhat like a Web page
- formatted as a Microsoft® Word™ document.

It's these formatting options that cause the problems.

When an Outlook™ user composes and sends a message using either Rich Text Format or HTML Format, Outlook automatically generates a file, **winmail.dat**, and attaches it to the end of the message. **winmail.dat** contains formatting information, in a human-unreadable form, that Outlook will use on the receiving end to display this e-mail message correctly.

Unfortunately, Outlook™ is the **ONLY** e-mail client program that can use this information! All of the other e-mail client programs don't understand this information.

For recipients:

If you are not using Microsoft® Outlook™ as the e-mail client program to read incoming messages:

One solution to the problem is to download the WMDecode program found at:

http://www.biblet.com (Look about halfway down the page)

This program will at least allow you to decode the winmail.dat files and extract any useful attachments from them. It costs $10, but is well worth it. It opens winmail.dat files and saves the contents either in the folder where you install WMDecode -or- in the folder where your attachments normally get saved.

Other than this, there's not much you can do on your end to fix the problem, since it's not your e-mail program generating the problem. If you just don't want to deal with the problem, the other approach is to reply to the individual who sent you the “offending” e-mail and ask that they re-send the message, with the attached files, as a plain text message, not in Rich Text Format or HTML. If they don't know how to do this, you can, of course, send them this document!

For senders:

If someone e-mails you to complain that they couldn't read your attachments, or to ask what this "winmail.dat" file is that you sent them, chances are you sent this e-mail using Microsoft® Outlook™. Although you are not the one having the problem, you are the one who gets to fix the problem.

There are a few different ways to fix this, depending on how you have set up your address book capabilities and whether or not you are using a mailing list or do a group mailing to send out the offending e-mail. Please read the remainder of this section before you begin making changes to your settings, as there are two special situations, discussed first, that you must consider before choosing the appropriate solution.

For sending messages to a mailing list or as a group mailing:

You MUST set ALL users up so that they receive plain text e-mail. If even one user is set up in your address book, or your default setting is to receive Rich Text Format or HTML format e-mail, everyone will receive that format. You must either edit every address book entry for every individual on your mailing list, or change your default sending mode to plain text. Both methods are described below.

(A) If the recipient is in your address book…

1. Open up your Outlook™ Address Book, either by clicking on the Address Book icon or by choosing **Tools->Address Book**
2. Select the recipient's entry in your address book and open up their Properties, either by clicking on the Properties button or double- clicking on the recipient's entry.
3. Select the "Name" tab in the Properties dialog window.
4. Check the box at the bottom of the window that says "Send e-mail using plain text only".
5. Click the "OK" button.

(B) If you enter the recipient's address manually in the To: line of your e-mail message **EACH TIME** you send a message to this person, you must:

1. Create a new e-mail message as you normally would, but before sending it,
2. Choose **Format->Plain Text** from the menu bar.
3. Now send your message.

To change your default sending mode:

You may change your default sending mode in Outlook™, thereby sending all e-mail messages as plain text, by doing the following:

1. Select **Tools->Options** from the Outlook™ menu bar.
2. Select the "Mail Format" tab in the dialog window.
3. In the first drop-down list, under the "Message Format" heading, select **Plain Text**
4. Click the "OK" button.

As an expedited option, any of your non-Outlook™ recipients can extract the attachment and re-send it to everyone on the list as the PDF.

-- Michael Foster <mfoster@stcllp.com>
Programmer/Analyst, STC Network Systems

Portions of original text by Julia Benson-Slaughter, Associate Professor of Computer Science
Georgia Perimeter College, Dunwoody Campus