The sys admin's daily grind: RoundCube

THE CHANGELING

Charly has a web mailer on his server just for family and friends. Last weekend he ditched the overly simplistic SquirrelMail for a Web 2.0 program.

BY CHARLY KÜHNAST

For many years, my faithful root server has held the email accounts of my family and a few friends. Some of them had their problems with fat clients like Thunderbird, and they simply used a web mailer to handle their mail. At the time, I selected SquirrelMail [1] for this, primarily for ease of use. After all these years, it's still hard to beat SquirrelMail on this account – the user interface is simple, and the SquirrelMail Project team has reduced it to the bare essentials.

However, my users, who had become increasingly demanding over the years, were living with a number of inconveniences, including recurring security issues, especially of late. Fortunately, SquirrelMail isn't the only web mailer on the planet, and last weekend, Round-Cube [2] finally succeeded the Squirrel.

Although the fairly low version number, 0.2.2, might make you think otherwise, RoundCube turns out to be an extremely mature and stable application that can look back on many years of development history.

A web-based installer, which warns you about unresolved dependencies, facilitates the installation process. Round-

Cube needs a database; the installer will accept MySQL, PostgreSQL, and SQLite, and it comes with scripts that create the required table structures.

In another configuration step, you need to enter the mail transport data, including the SMTP server, IMAP server, default domain, and locale. After doing so, the installer creates two configuration files: one for the database parameters and another for the web mailer configuration proper. After moving both to RoundCube's web path, you are ready to rumble.

Nice to Have

The user interface is pleasingly tidy, with just the right amount of AJAX support, and it is intuitive to use (see Figure 1). The ability to load elements embedded in email is disabled by default for security reasons. Multiple SMTP identities can be configured per user – not that anybody needs this on my server, but it's nice to have.

Conveniently, RoundCube searches your address book for a target address while you are still typing. At least it saves some typing and the occasional inevitable error. If you look at the address book, you can see some potential improvements for future versions. For example, the address import and export function only supports the vCard format right now, and I can't aggregate contacts to create groups.
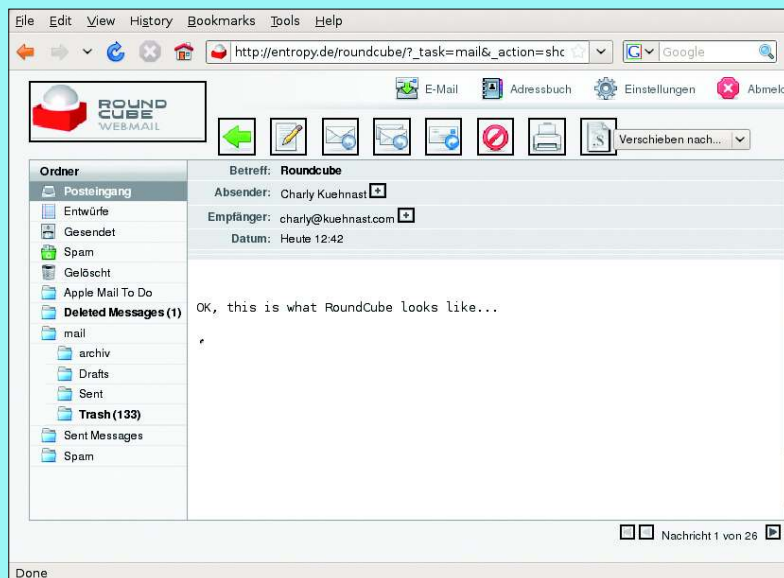

Figure 1: Thanks to AJAX, the RoundCube interface feels almost like a native mail client.

On the other hand, attachment handling is simple; RoundCube even has a spell checker. If you are still having problems, the support forums and a documentation wiki are close at hand [3].

For now, I'm looking forward to seeing whether my co-users are just as impressed as I am, or whether they will want their SquirrelMail back – no matter how spartan it might be. ■

INFO

[1] SquirrelMail: *http://squirrelmail.org*

[2] RoundCube: *http://www.roundcube.net*

[3] RoundCube wiki: *http://trac.roundcube.net/wiki*

THE AUTHOR

Charly Kühnast is a Unix operating system administrator at the Data Center in Moers, Germany. His tasks include firewall and DMZ security and availability. He divides his leisure time into hot, wet, and eastern sectors, where he enjoys cooking, fresh water aquariums, and learning Japanese, respectively.