Exclaimer Auto Responder

Windows IT Pro

Automated email replies are the heart of **Exclaimer Auto Responder**, but it also does a lot more. It can redirect messages, modify senders, add recipients to mail, and implement ethical walls between groups. Microsoft Exchange Server has some of these features, especially Exchange 2010, but Auto Responder provides them with granular control and easy manipulation of automatically generated messages.

Auto Responder's installer is simple and takes less than ten minutes. It comes as a single .exe file that's compatible with Exchange 2007 SP1 Rollup 5 and later and Exchange 2010. It's 64-bit–only, in keeping with the needs of Exchange, and runs on Windows Server 2003 or later Windows Server OSs. Auto Responder is deeply tied into Exchange, operating as a custom transport agent, so it needs to be on an Exchange server with the Hub Transport role.

The final part of setup is configuring your first policy. The New Auto Responder Policy wizard is well laid out and offers relevant information for all the available policies. I have one small complaint about the wizard: Once you've completed the wizard, you must click save in the main console or your new policy won't take effect. I'd rather have things work immediately after finishing the wizard.

With setup being so simple, you can focus on understanding the product. You can apply a huge amount of configuration to policies—Figure 1 shows some of the possibilities. The settings will be very familiar if you've ever set up an Exchange Transport Rule. There are far too many possibilities to list them all here, but some key examples include close control of the subject of the returned message, the ability to covertly add recipients, granular control over who policies apply to (such as being inside or outside the organization or a member of a group), presenting a different external email address from your main company address (which can be great in a merger scenario), preventing groups from sending mail to one another, providing a specific response only during certain time periods (like an out of office message), and allowing a catchall

policy for any particular domain.

Auto Responder doesn't simply reroute or add a recipient to messages that require an automatic response. Some of my favorite options include adding attachments to an auto response and adding the sent message to the reply just like Outlook does, to make the response seem more human. The key benefit of Auto Responder is the control it gives you over the response message. A template library in the product has a few examples of different auto response messages, but it would have been nice to have a whole bunch of different examples to build on.

If you have multiple Exchange Hub Transport servers and want to maintain a single set of policies, templates, and settings across all of them, you have several options. The simplest is to back up your configuration by exporting it to a file, which you can then import on another server. You can also do it automatically by installing Auto Responder on each Hub Transport server and then setting up a central file share. There's a security question to note with this method: The Everyone group must be given read permissions to this share because the service the software runs under is Local System. These permissions could allow anyone to discover the share and view potentially sensitive policies within. Exclaimer suggests using a hidden share, but security by obscurity isn't a great idea in my opinion.

Other than the possible security problem, the process works well. When administrators make any changes, they're prompted to apply them on the remote servers. The changes are saved to the shared folder, which the software monitors
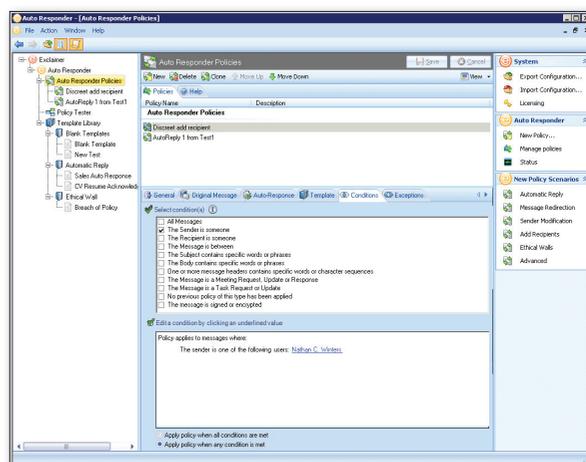

Figure 1: Auto Responder Policies

for changes. Changes are applied within about 10-20 seconds.

Exclaimer Auto Responder is a well thought out, well documented, clear, and effective product that gives administrators the ability to automate a variety of actions to be taken based around almost infinite scenarios. Notification and response templates ensure that a company brand can be maintained throughout your communications.

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PROS: Quality documentation; very granular policy settings; easy to configure

CONS: Questionable security with remote deployment feature; irritating need to save settings after completion of policy wizard; could use more response templates out of the box

RATING: ◆◆◆◆◇

PRICE: $495 per server and $99 per year for support

RECOMMENDATION: Exclaimer Auto Responder is a well thought out, comprehensive, and effective product that gives administrators the ability to automate a variety of actions in many scenarios. The product helps maintain control and branding, features likely to be most interesting to large organizations.

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