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BlackBerry is expected to stay on
Still, e-mail users may want Plan B

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The popular BlackBerry e-mail service isn't likely to shut down later this month because of a patent-infringement lawsuit, analysts predict. Still, smart companies won't wait until then to find alternatives for their hyperproductive employees.

Analysts are betting that Research in Motion Ltd., maker of the wireless devices used by 3.2 million Americans, will settle the case or find a technical way around it.

"We believe Research in Motion has a lot of options," said Bill Hughes, principal analyst with Scottsdale-based research firm In-Stat. "Because it's theoretically possible that a dire situation could happen, it's big enough that we can't ignore it."

Adrienne Downey agrees. She is a senior analyst with Phoenix-based Semico Research Corp.

"The bottom line is I really don't think Research in Motion will let the service go down," she said. "They will either pay up or make sure their software workaround is solid enough to provide service."

Ontario-based Research in Motion was sued in 2001 by licensing firm NTP Inc., alleging that RIM had infringed on patents in NTP's portfolio. A key decision in the case could come Feb. 24, when a federal judge will hold a hearing to consider shutting down the BlackBerry system's U.S. portion.