HOSTED EXCHANGE BUYER'S GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

Messaging lies at the heart of a business' ability to communicate, to interact quickly and effectively with everyone from employees and suppliers to clients and prospects.

Yet supporting an on-premise messaging solution absorbs much of a business' IT dollars. In addition to buying the software, you must expend resources on maintenance, implementation, upgrades, licensing, support and archiving. Downtime - whether scheduled or due to failure or disaster - costs money, disrupts business operations and creates customer dissatisfaction, especially in a world where the vast majority of users check their emails from home, from on the road and after-hours.

COMPARING COSTS

Although many decision-makers claim on-premise Exchange implementations are less expensive to deploy and operate than hosted Exchange, the opposite is often true. Just add up the dollars: A 10-person on-premise Exchange solution costs $389.78 vs. $27.00 per seat per month for a hosted Exchange solution, for a total whopping savings of $362.78 or 93 percent, according to Osterman Research. At 100 users, on-premise costs $37.29 per seat each month compared with a hosted service's cost of $12.25 for savings of $25.04 or 67 percent. With 1,000 users, on-site costs $20.72 for each seat every month vs. $9.85 for hosted for savings of $10.87 or 52 percent, Osterman Research finds.

It is not surprising then that even some large enterprises are migrating to hosted Exchange: GlaxoSmithKline, for example, is moving its 100,000 users to hosted Exchange, the giant pharmaceutical company said in March 2009.

There are other savings, too. Because the cost-per-seat is fixed over the contract's lifetime, your business has a predictable monthly outlay without the risk of unforeseen expenditures. If you support Exchange internally, you must take into account potential disruptive forces such as natural disasters, power outages and office relocations that can add unforeseen costs to your on-premise Exchange management budget.

As you add employees, you run the risk of maxing out your internal infrastructure, forcing you to expend dollars and hours buying and installing servers, storage and other infrastructure to support new hires. Of course, this adds more costs to your existing Exchange budget at a time when you would rather spend IT funds on using technology to solve business challenges.

FINDING A HOSTED EXCHANGE PARTNER

Having decided to use a hosted Exchange solution, it's time to research the many providers that will vie for your business.

Like any relationship, you want a true and trustworthy partner with a history of success, of profitability and of adherence to its Service Level Agreements. Speak to existing customers, and ask them about performance, adherence to SLAs, speed of response and technical support. Ensure your list of candidates operates in the black, with money in the bank and a proven business model. In a world of mergers and acquisitions -as well as business closures - it's important to find a partner with a positive track-record, one that will be around for the long-term as opposed to a start-up facing a steep learning curve, and financial and customer-service challenges.

For example, Click IT includes a 99.999 percent uptime guarantee, equivalent to less than six minutes of downtime per year. Although some companies claim 100-percent uptime, this is unrealistic and generally is viewed as marketing-speak. To support its high-level uptime guarantee, Click IT invests solely in technology from industry-leading vendors such as Cisco and Dell.

In addition to providing 24x7 access to Microsoft Exchange, your hosted Exchange provider should deliver email archiving; ensure continuity; encrypt emails; and protect you from spam, phishing, viruses and other malware. Make sure the solution encompasses mobile devices such as BlackBerries, cell phones and Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs).

Discuss how the service provider migrated other companies from an on-premise Exchange environment or how they worked with a company's previous hosted Exchange provider. Were there any problems? Does the service provider offer customization? What other value-added services do they offer? For a list of questions to ask your prospective hosted Exchange provider, see the callout box.

Click IT uses proprietary infrastructure technology that works with Microsoft Exchange to make it easy for businesses to set-up, manage and secure their email. During migration, Click IT guides you through a migration process whose pace you control. Since the migration is conducted over the phone, you can ask questions in real-time. Many other providers use email or knowledge-based instructions for cookie-cutter guidance Click IT developed proprietary tools to simplify, automate and streamline migration.

As well as the live migration support, Click IT employs a slew of Microsoft- and RIM-certified Exchange support staff to provide you with complete access to Exchange experts. Many other service providers staff their support lines during regular business hours, even though many users access email at odd and off-hours.

It's critical that your hosting partner has the resources you need to answer questions, whether during migration, day-to-day operations or in an emergency. All-too-often, hosting providers have a skeleton or non-existent support staff after-hours, often the time at which most problems arise as your end-users try to access Exchange while away from their office.

CONCLUSION

Just as you scrutinize the providers of your on-premise technology, dig deep into the claims your prospective hosted service providers make. Speaking to existing clients is an invaluable way to gauge providers' veracity. Asking the hard questions now should create a true partnership that enables hosted Exchange services to live up to its promises.

20 QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR PROSPECTIVE HOSTED EXCHANGE PROVIDER

How many users do you support today? Service providers with only a handful of clients face an uncertain future.

What does your SLA provide? No one can provide a guaranteed 100 percent uptime so beware over-inflated promises or, conversely, providers with no written SLA.

How financially-sound is the hosted service provider? If a hosting company disappears, your Exchange implementation is at risk.

What do current customers say? Nobody knows a service better than existing clients, so make sure you get concrete answers to hard questions about reliability, access, customer service and any problems they've experienced.

Do you have Microsoft-certified technicians on-staff? Your Exchange host should employ Microsoft-certified staff to ensure technological prowess and support. One reason you're partnering with a service provider is to leverage their investment in highly qualified personnel.

Which in-house technologies do you use to support your hosted clients? If a service provider doesn't invest in its infrastructure, this does not bode well for the services it provides. Make sure providers are using top-tier vendors and the latest technologies.

What other services do you provide? Finding a partner with multiple areas of expertise allows you to easily expand into other technology hosting agreements for money- and time-savers such as unified communications.

What migration tools are at my disposal? A provider's use of automated tools eliminates a lot of the necessary legwork, while live telephone support ensures you'll get answers when and how you need them.

How do you support after-hours email users? Some service companies only have a skeleton crew, if any, after-hours. Since employees access email around-the-clock, it's important that someone is always available to answer the phone if questions or problems arise. Therefore, 24x7 support is vital.

How do you support my end-users in different geographies or countries? You don't want agreements with multiple service providers; make certain your provider supports all the regions in which you operate - or look elsewhere.

Do you support mobile email users? With more and more people accessing email via their phones it's critical that your service provider supports these users.

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Are you PCI Certified? Payment Card Industry data security standards - mandated in many states - encompass acquiring banks, Independent Sales Organizations (ISOs), processors, hosts, e-commerce and retail merchants, shopping carts and other merchant services providers. PCI is a set of requirements designed to ensure that companies that **process, store** or **transmit** credit card information retain a secure environment.

Do you offer Microsoft Exchange as a hosted service? If not, how will the service provider support you when you decide to upgrade?

What is your average on-hold time for callers? Obviously nobody wants to spend their time on-hold. If a company cannot quantify hold times, that should send up a warning flag.

How will you support me as I grow? As you expand operations, can your service provider support more employees, more geographies and more technologies?

How do I control my data if I use your service? Your data should belong to you, and this fact must be stated clearly in your agreement. Watch out for companies that may hold data hostage if their contract is not renewed.

Is any of the migration process automated? Automation eliminates many time-consuming but necessary tasks, reducing the chance of errors and speeding up your hosted Exchange implementation. These tools allow you to learn from the combined experiences of your service provider, rather than demanding you duplicate efforts.

How do you help me migrate my end-users? Some hosted Exchange businesses only offer a technical support manual. Look for a partner that provides telephone and online support, as well as automation tools for many processes.

How long does migration typically take? It's important that your migration can occur quickly so you can immediately reap the benefits of your hosted Exchange agreement. The more automation and live assistance available to you, the speedier the process will be.