

MICROSOFT® HOSTED EXCHANGE BUYER'S GUIDE

20 QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR VENDOR

Introduction

Staying connected any place and any time has become a fundamental requirement of doing business today. Employees need and expect reliable, efficient and powerful communication tools to contact each other, share schedules and information, and collaborate. One of the leading business communication applications providing these services is Microsoft® Exchange. It supplies businesses with safe and secure email, calendar and contacts on the PC, phone and Web, enabling employees to stay linked and in sync with each other.

Today, business decision-makers have a choice of how to access Microsoft® Exchange. They can invest in and maintain the equipment themselves, or they can engage a hosted solution. A hosted solution offers numerous advantages, particularly in terms of cost. This white paper will touch briefly on those advantages. But its main purpose will be to help decision-makers choose a provider of hosted Exchange services. The heart of this document is a checklist of questions to ask when comparing Exchange hosts.

Comparing Costs

Supporting an on-premise Exchange solution can absorb a disproportionate share of a business' IT dollars. In addition to buying the software, the business must expend resources on maintenance, implementation, upgrades, licensing, support and archiving. Downtime—whether scheduled or due to failure or disaster—costs money. But it also disrupts business operations and erodes customer satisfaction, especially in a world where most end-users check their email away from work, whether at home, on the road or after-hours.

It is possible to find claims that on-premise Exchange implementations cost less to deploy and operate than hosted Exchange solutions. However, the facts contradict those assertions. For example, an independent study¹ by Osterman Research found that a 10-person on-premise Exchange system

cost \$389.65 .96 per seat, per month. That compared with \$32.46 per seat, per month, for a hosted Exchange solution. At 100 users, the study found, an on-premise Exchange setup cost \$39.85 per seat each month, compared with a hosted service's cost of \$14.45 per seat, per month. That produced monthly savings of \$25.40 or 64 percent. With 1,000 users, the on-site implementation cost \$24.13 per seat, per month, versus \$10.85 for the hosted solution, for a savings of \$13.28 or 55 percent.

Hosted Exchange makes sense for small and medium-size companies. Even some large enterprises are migrating to hosted Exchange. GlaxoSmithKline, the giant pharmaceutical company, recently reported that it moved its some 100,000 users to a hosted Exchange model.

There are other savings with hosted solutions, too. Because the cost per seat is fixed over the contract's lifetime of an agreement, a business gains a predictable monthly outlay while minimizing the risk of unforeseen expenditures. What's more, businesses that support Exchange internally must account for potentially disruptive forces such as natural disasters, power outages or office relocations that can add unforeseen costs to their on-premise Exchange management budget.

As a business adds employees, it runs the risk of stressing its internal communication infrastructure. This can force a business to expend dollars and hours researching, buying and installing servers, storage and other devices to support new hires. This adds further costs to its existing Exchange budget at a time when most companies would prefer spending IT funds on using new technologies to solve business challenges that support your business.

Finding a Hosted Exchange Partner

Once a business decides to use a hosted Exchange solution, the next step involves researching providers. In this section, we will provide some general guidelines to use for your search. Following this section, we offer a more detailed list of questions to ask potential service partners.

As in any relationship, it is best to choose an honest, trustworthy partner with a history of success, long-term viability and customer satisfaction. Ask your potential host to supply references. Then follow up and speak with existing customers. Ask them about the prospective partner's performance, adherence to Service Level Agreements, responsiveness and technical support. Ensure your list of candidates operates in the black, with sufficient reserves and has a proven business model. In a world of mergers, acquisitions and bankruptcies, look for a partner with a positive track record. Make sure your candidate is a stable concern as opposed to a start-up facing a steep learning curve, financial pressures and customer-service challenges.

Anytime, continuous access is critical. But beware of companies claiming 100 percent "uptime," or availability. This is both a questionable promise and an unrealistic expectation. Ask your candidates to report their published uptimes. While not 100 percent, their availability should be better than 99 percent. One indication of reliability is the quality "behind the curtain." Look for a partner who uses leading technology infrastructure from reputable highly regarded and leading vendors such as Cisco and Dell.

Providing virtually nearly perfect uninterrupted access to Microsoft® Exchange is an important attribute, of course. But

there are other services to consider. Your hosted Exchange provider also should deliver email archiving and ensure continuity. Safety and security are crucial factors, too. Make sure your host encrypts emails and protects you from spam, phishing, viruses and other malware. Also, check that the solution encompasses mobile devices such as BlackBerry® products and other smartphones.

Making the move to a new provider should be seamless—and painless. Ask the candidate companies how they migrated customers from an on-premise Exchange environment or how they worked with a company's previous hosted Exchange provider. Does the service provider offer customization? What other value-added services do they offer? If you can, ask current customers the same questions. Were there any problems during migration? Did a real person guide them over the phone, or were they given cookie-cutter instructions?

As well as providing live migration support, does the prospective host offer around-the-clock customer support? How long do callers wait on hold when they first call in? How knowledgeable, helpful and friendly are the customer support representatives?

It's critical that your hosting partner has the resources you need to answer questions, whether during migration, in day-to-day operations or in an emergency. All too often, hosting providers maintain a skeleton staff—or none at all—after normal business hours. Yet this is precisely often the time when most problems arise, as end-users try to access Exchange while away from the office.

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 Service Level Agreement provide?

No one can provide a guaranteed 100 percent uptime. So beware of 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 normal business 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, 24 x 7 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.

Are you PCI Certified?

Payment card Industry (PCI) 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 2010 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 that 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.

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 will lead to a true partnership that enables hosted Exchange services to live up to their promises.



About Integra Telecom

Integra Telecom, Inc., connects business by providing business-grade networking, communications and cloud solutions to thousands of business and carrier customers in 11 Western states, including Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, Utah and Washington. The company owns and operates a nationally acclaimed best-in-class fiber-optic network consisting of a 5,000-mile high-speed long-haul fiber network and a 3,000-mile metropolitan access network including more than 1,700 fiber-fed buildings.

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¹The Case for Hosted Microsoft Exchange, an Osterman Research White Paper, Black Diamond, WA 98010, 2009–2010
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