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Mixed Signals

Decoding Enterprise Email & Communications Needs

Key Points

- Use server clustering to keep email up and running.
- Use a compliant archiving technology for IM.
- Consider VoIP needs and expectations and then research and compare solutions before jumping in.
- Rein in smartphones and devices or consider outsourcing their management.

SMES rely on increasingly high-tech modes of communication to stay competitive. Email, IM, VoIP, and smartphones add functionality to an organization, but they also create additional challenges for the IT departments that must support and provide them. In order to apply multiple communications successfully, an enterprise must know what it needs, acquire the right technologies and services, and keep the devices secure and compliant.



■ Email Challenges

Email has become so ubiquitous that even two people starting their “enterprise” in a garage have access to it. The challenge is not about whether you have email—it’s about how you maintain email uptime. “Email is the life-blood of most organizations. It’s essential to operations,” says Douglas E. Rahn, president and CEO of IND (www.indcorp.com). With employees working remotely and accessing email via their smartphones, email uptime has become a 24/7 critical issue for business operations, even for companies that have traditionally operated from 9 to 5.

“Server clustering is a solution to this challenge,” says Rahn. By clustering two or more servers to work together in tandem, an SME’s IT department (or outsourced email provider) assures fault tolerance should a single server go down. Clustering enables organizations to schedule maintenance for the failed server because the remaining servers keep the service running without abatement.

Following uptime, spam is still email’s second largest nemesis, Rahn continues. “For every good email, we get 99 spam messages,” says Benson Yeung, senior partner of Triware Network Systems (www.tns.com). Spam is replete with viruses, malware, and phishing attacks and takes up lots of valuable bandwidth and storage space.

Yeung says most organizations do not delete spam by default because of false positives—good email mistaken for spam by spam filters. They need that mail, and because of increasingly strict compliance requirements, they need to archive the spam, as well. “The end result is that enterprises must keep adding storage, and they must back that storage up in case it crashes,” Yeung concludes.

“We recommend multilayer spam defenses,” Yeung says. Set up antispam and antivirus at the SMTP mail relay server where there are no users. Engage spam with multiple layers of cleaning via these types of solutions before it enters the production layer.

■ IM Challenges

For small to midsized enterprises that choose to allow instant messaging, or IM, meeting compliance regulations is the biggest challenge, Rahn explains. SMEs have to log and capture all IM communications for the SEC, FINRA (the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority), and compliance requirements set by their organizations or industries.

Companies concerned about their own compliance are requiring their vendors, partners, and clients throughout the supply chain to archive IM, as well. “All companies are subject to court-ordered discovery at any time and, therefore, findings by the court or their legal opponent as to whether they logged these communications,” Rahn says.

In response, SMEs should consider technologies that meet legal standards for archiving instant messages securely in accordance with any relevant compliance guidelines.

■ VoIP Challenges

A major roadblock for VoIP is that companies don’t know what kind of VoIP technology they need, whether a hosted solution, a fully managed solution, or something else, notes Leigh Henry, director of product management at Apptix (www.apptix.com). SMEs should clarify what they plan to achieve with VoIP, what their projected growth is, and how much they plan to integrate voice with other technologies. Then they need to talk with the vendors, find the best technological fit for their budgets, and try out a solution, Henry continues.

Hosted solutions are often the best option for SMEs that cannot otherwise afford VoIP. “Hosted solutions are priced more like software as a service. There are no large, upfront investments as there are with in-house technologies,” Rahn says. The pay-as-you-go SaaS model may be more appealing in times when finances are short. Many hosted vendors include administration and adds/changes in the base cost of service.

■ Smartphone Challenges

“Eighty-seven percent of companies increased their use of smartphones in the last year,” says Andrew Borg, senior research analyst of wireless and mobility for Aberdeen Group. As usage increases, companies want to see what employees are getting out of the devices and whether they are getting the best rates.

When companies allow users to select from a wider variety of devices or decide to support rogue devices, support becomes more expensive and labor-intensive. “There is a pain point around 500 devices where the company needs a full-time employee to support the mobile deployment. That is one person working 40 hours a week just to manage the devices,” says Hyoun Park, research editor for the technology markets group at Aberdeen.

Where possible, companies should limit supported devices to two or three and refuse to support rogue smartphones. Companies that would like to take on more should consider outsourcing wireless device management to vendors offering full service in this arena.

Such services offer complete smartphone and wireless device lifecycle management, including device policy management, billing management, help desk services, and device disposal and refresh, explains Jim Carroll, executive vice president of global wireless services at Rivermine (www.rivermine.com). “These solutions reduce overall costs by making sure people are on the best rate plans and that the company has visibility into device usage,” Carroll says.

SMEs save when they know exactly which employees need these devices and ensure that only those employees receive them, Carroll explains. Policies help ensure appropriate usage so bandwidth and minutes are not wasted on personal calls or infected downloads. ■

by David Geer

Top Challenge: Porting Email To A New System

One of the biggest challenges for enterprise communications is porting legacy email data to a new email system, explains James Bond, director of engineering at Aptix (www.apptix.com). Data conversion does not happen automatically. "IT cannot go to 1,000 users to update their email to a new system one user at a time," says Bond.

SMEs can use service migration techniques that will help to automate the process. But a simpler solution is hosted email. The company can simply download it without having to visit each workstation manually to set it up. An internal email conversion takes weeks or months. A hosted solution can do an email conversion in a few hours, Bond affirms.

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