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shared contacts and to-do lists.

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As firms continue to change their technology to the latest Microsoft Server 2003, Windows SBS Server 2003, Novell NetWare or Linux operating systems, frequent questions asked are these: Should I use Microsoft Exchange 2003? What are the alternatives?

Exchange is the Microsoft server add-on that handles e-mail, shared calendars, shared contacts and to-do lists. The shared contacts and shared calendar function is a convenient place to store all general contact information for your firm. The trick with the shared contacts is keeping them synchronized with other sources of name, address and phone numbers throughout your firm. Over time, this will get better as vendors like CCH, Thompson, Intuit and others make the integration into their systems tight and synchronized with Exchange and Outlook. But for now, the promise of integration is only beginning to work. In the meantime,

what are the benefits of integration

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lost. Exchange keeps a complete history of e-mail on the server and allows a user to replicate this e-mail to their local workstation. The benefits of this approach are

that you can work from your home,
a client's office or from
the road and have a complete history
of e-mail available. Additional
advantages include the ability
to work from different machines
or from a web browser using Outlook
Web Access (OWA) as your mail
client. The disadvantages are
that the synchronization to a
local desktop running Office 2003
to the server can be slow, and
greater communication speed is
required to run Exchange/Outlook
than running a POP3 e-mail account
with Outlook Express. Furthermore,
you have additional licensing
fees as outlined below.

Calendar. Second, Exchange servers may simplify the way you use a calendar. The key benefit to an Exchange server in this area is that you can coordinate your calendar with others for events where you all must participate. If you want to schedule a meeting with another partner, and use

a couple of other resources like

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computer.

To-do lists. Third, Exchange servers may simplify the way you keep your to-do lists. Besides having a local copy of items that you need to do, you can use the shared to-do list functions of Exchange to delegate items that need to be completed. These items are automatically added to the to-do lists of other people and may be added to their schedule as well.

Integration. Finally, Exchange is often used as the integration tool by vendors to extract or add client names, addresses and events to your calendar. Microsoft has published the standards for programmers to use to help them create and add, or to extract and use, the key information of contacts, to-do items and calendar events. Vendors like CCH, Intuit, Thomson and others are using such functionality to integrate with their own products.

The key downsides to the firm are costs and the requirements to run Exchange properly.

First,
we recommend that a completely separate server from the file and print server be added and maintained to be used

by Exchange. This is particularly

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a technician that knows what he is doing. Even if you have an in-house technician, installation of the Exchange server should be contracted to an outside IT consulting firm that knows how to properly set up and configure an Exchange server.

Third, you need to realize that Exchange is a very popular hacker target. You will want to protect the Exchange server by adding an Internet appliance to filter out virus attacks and spam, such as the DoubleCheck server, or to add more software (and more overhead), such as Norton Corporate Anti-virus and firewall. You'll want to add these to the Exchange server to protect it from outside attacks. Finally, licensing costs for Exchange Client Access Licenses need to be considered.

How much does it cost for Exchange? Well, first you must have an adequate server. If this is a separate server, it should be your most powerful machine in the organization and

be configured for reliability. Xeon

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one of three ways:

1. Included as part of Windows SBS Server 2003 Premium edition
' the best way for small firms,
2. With Windows server standard edition and an Exchange server
' around \$2,500, or
3. As part of a cluster of two or more Exchange servers for reliability using Windows Server 2003 and Exchange Server Enterprise Edition
' around \$7,000 for software per server.

Exchange Client Access Licenses (CALs) will commonly be \$100 each. The CALs can be used with different versions of Microsoft Office, but you will have the best results if you are on the 2003 (current) version of Office. If you have not been upgrading Microsoft Office, you will have additional expenses. Finally, to install Exchange server, your consulting group will likely need

between four to 20 hours at their

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Notes Mail. All of these products do not integrate as well with Microsoft Outlook, but all of them have features to integrate e-mail, calendar and to-do functions and to use Outlook. Remember that outsourcing your Exchange server functions can be done with a service like www.myhosting.com, and this may be your least cost approach of implementing Microsoft Exchange.

The benefits of using Exchange are frequently judged to be worth the extra effort and money to implement a shared calendar, to-do list and for long-term e-mail storage. Having an Exchange server available is definitely a productivity improvement and a convenience. With our dependency on e-mail, and the complexity of our calendars, having Exchange available can be a real benefit to the firm.

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