Top tips in bridging the gaps in Office 365

Mimecast's Senior Sales Engineer, Giulio Magni, looks at Office 365's potential shortcomings and how companies can overcome them.

Microsoft has said that Office 365 is the future and the numbers agree. More than a million subscribers are signing up each month and four out of five Fortune 500 companies are already using Office 365.

Why the overwhelming success? The reason lies in the rapid rate of cloud adoption, both global and local. Ipsos MORI's SMB IT Research 2015 found that 57% of South African small to medium businesses are already accessing their work remotely through using a cloud service. And this number is only set to grow. [http://www.idc.com/getdoc.jsp?containerId=253476 IDC Futurescape]] predicts that as early as 2017, more than a third of new applications will be cloud-enabled.

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The exponential growth numbers paint a picture of a future where Office 365 is standard, and the question that emerges is not so much "should I migrate" as it is "when will I migrate". There is, however, another question that needs answering before making the leap to Office 365, namely what the practical implications of the move are. The unspoken promise of Office 365 is that it is the last great data migration that businesses will ever have to make. Unfortunately, it still comes with all the teething problems of any large scale IT implementation. No IT solution is perfect, and identifying the gaps in Office 365 before migrating is critical to a smooth transition.

The hidden shortcomings

Microsoft's messaging on Office 365 is that it is a one-stop cloud solution for managing important enterprise data such as email. To an extent, this is true, especially for smaller companies. Office 365 is rich in features: 99.9% email availability in its SLA, antivirus and malware protection and email recovery.

However, a closer look at the functionality of these features reveals pain points. Outages happen and even an excellent product like Office 365 is vulnerable. Officially, the amount of downtime is low enough to adhere to its SLA, however there have been recordings of O365 outages. Downtime can include admin access, AD authentication, policy engine, archive access and so on. Adding up the outages across all of the services amounts to an issue that doesn't just impact the average email user but entire organisations.

The data dilemma

There are other gaps in the Office 365 platform that impact business continuity and data archiving. In Office 365, there is no 'true' email archiving, for example. Users can delete emails from the archive unless they are placed on In-Place Hold, something that can affect compliance. While there is a recovery period if this happens, the data is lost forever as soon as the deleted items folder is emptied.

Another notable shortcoming is the lack of mobile access users have to the email archive. End-users are only able to access the archive from a browser or Windows desktop. In addition, Office 365 lacks the ability to archive email on a network drive, further limiting the archive's mobility. In an always-on world, the inability to search and recover important email data can have serious business consequences.

Two clouds are better than one

None of this makes Office 365 a poor solution. On the contrary, it is an excellent product that will over time add new layers of functionality. But just like the on premises world from which we come it is precisely this strength that opens the space for a third-party services aimed at supporting the Office 365 experience.

The cloud may have changed the way in which we work, but one thing remains true: It is risky relying on a single service provider, particularly when it means that your data is essentially sitting in one giant basket. Mimecast's approach to this has been to create products that can work seamlessly alongside Office 365 to enhance its email archiving capabilities. We anticipate more companies will offer these kinds of add-on services as Office 365 becomes more universal.

How can businesses decide which of these third-party services is right for their needs? Companies looking to migrate to Office 365 need to closely examine their own requirements and where Office 365 might fall short in addressing these. That will give them guidance that will allow them to seek out products to successfully bridge the gap.

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Giulio Magni offers these top tips to optimise your Office 365 experience:

• Not all Office 365 plans are created equal. Vet the different plans' offerings and use your Office 365 dashboard to research which purchase service add-ons might need to be added to meet your organisational needs.

• Most on-premises legacy archive solutions don't work with Office 365, leaving your users unable to access archived email. Get a compatible archiving solution in place before the migration.

• Never use the Permanently Delete option in Office 365 without having a robust archiving solution in place. Set up retention policies and tags early on and test these on a few accounts before applying company-wide.

• Microsoft is continuously improving functionality and fixing bugs through its updates, but these may affect productivity. Enable First Release to let your support staff try updates before worldwide release.

• Finally, you will hear Microsoft say that you don't need another service but they cannot be impartial about mitigating themselves. It is your business and your responsibility to keep the email communication flowing and compliant. Remember the principals you adopted when everything was in house - the same methodology still applies today - just in the cloud.