



TIME FOR LAW FIRMS TO TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AT OFFICE 365

Michael Paul | December 4, 2017 | Software

When I first began my IT career, one of the more complicated applications I had to support was Microsoft Exchange. This is the flagship enterprise application from Microsoft that drives millions of email messages each day. When Exchange is humming, business communication is flowing. But when the application is having problems, many businesses come to a screeching halt.

I am an IT professional who has a love-hate relationship with Exchange. As long as I could hear and see the server, I knew I had a sense of control. Emails would flow and data was protected with a nice piece of equipment I could touch. However, it came at a cost.

As our company grew larger, I found management of Exchange grew increasingly burdensome. We'd always have to spend money on an Exchange-certified employee to keep the system optimally configured. We'd spend a large amount of time planning downtime windows and upgrades and making sure backups were occurring regularly. At times, storage issues became a problem. This was compounded with more emails coming into the system. I was spending too much time supporting the system and not enough time consulting with clients.

Fortunately, Microsoft developed new software and a new platform to ease the burden of running an Exchange server. This new platform, called Office 365, is a huge disruptor to the previous on-premise Exchange model. Microsoft took many of their most popular applications and bundled them into an easily consumable format.

As I've increasingly come to understand the service offering, I've found that the solution is not just about hosted email. It's a transformation in your IT spending and resources. It's a platform that certainly offers hosted email, but it has many other features that any law firm can leverage in their environment.

So, exactly what is Office 365? At its heart, it is a suite of services and software, ranging from hosted email, to intranet, cloud storage, and security features. It is sold in a Software as a Service (SaaS) model. Microsoft has a dizzying array of plans; thus, there are several options to choose from to meet a firm's technology needs.

For the purpose of this article, the only plans we will discuss are the Business and the Enterprise plans. The Home and School editions are specifically designed with those markets in mind. The Business plans come in a few flavors: Office 365 for Business, Business Premium, and Business Essentials. The Enterprise plans are labeled E1, E3, and E5.

The first difference to consider between the two plans is user count. If your law firm has 300 users or fewer, then the Business and Enterprise plans are both viable options. If the firm has more than 300 users, the Enterprise plans are the ones to evaluate. If the firm is on the cusp, say 250 users, I recommend looking at Enterprise plans to save on a migration step when that 300-user count is surpassed. Also, when considering your user count, any shared mailboxes must be included.

Another item to consider is mailbox size. The Business plans max out at 50GB, with the ability to add an unlimited archive option onto the subscription. The Enterprise plans have a 100GB limit, which was recently increased from 50GB. This plan includes an unlimited archive with the subscription.

Another feature the Enterprise plan offers is Litigation Hold. This feature can be enabled per mailbox, and is not available in the Business level plans.

Office 365 also offers the Office 2016 Pro Plus desktop suite. This includes the ever-popular Outlook, Word, Excel and PowerPoint applications. Any plan that includes these desktop apps also includes the ability to install the software on up to five separate machines, including Macs.

Migration to Office 365 is highly dependent on a lot of factors within your law firm's existing environment. The current Exchange version and Office version your firm is using play the largest role in planning out a successful move to Office 365.

If your firm has Exchange 2007 or earlier, this migration requires additional planning, with a possible two-step migration to Exchange 2013/2016, prior to migrating to Office 365 hosted email. There are several factors to consider for older Exchange migrations.

Your current office version is a huge factor in the migration sequence. The Office 365 platform has discontinued support for Office 2007, specifically Outlook 2007 email application. If the firm is on Office 2007, migrating the backend to Office 365 and then keeping existing Outlook running will prove problematic.

There are other Outlook plugins to consider. Document management systems, IP telephony, macros and other office productivity tools rely on the existing Office versions. Many of these add-ins are specifically programmed for that Office version.

The most popular migration scenarios to Office 365 frequently include hosted email and new versions of Office. However, most Office 365 plans have other value-adds. Additional software can include instant messaging, an intranet based on SharePoint, cloud storage and video streaming services. Many of these services are included in the monthly spend.

With the bundled services and applications available to end users, Office 365 can help solve many IT challenges. Office 365 is a viable platform to consider for any law firm's IT budget.

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I have been a big fan of the Windows version of Office 365 (less so of the Mac version) and have been using it since its launch. In particular, Word has literally become a way of life in day-to-day practice, and there are a host of great third-party tools of their that work exceptionally well with the Windows version. For purposes of presentations, PowerPoint is the only tool that I use, and Excel is great for financial analysis and the like. Regrettably, or positively, I rarely use Outlook due to a host of incompatibilities experienced in previous hosted environments. However, the scaled-down version that I do use, primarily for purposive notifications from Microsoft and others, work quite well.

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