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Before You Buy!

Ten Questions to Ask Before Moving Your Email to the Cloud

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Abstract

Email is an essential tool for businesses of all shapes and sizes. In fact, most organizations have adopted email communications into their business processes, making email crucial to the very functioning of the business. Businesses require email to be completely reliable and near real-time. Email is also a potential source of liability for the business, and therefore requires strict security, privacy and governance. Given the importance of email to an organization, and the requirment for real-time access from anywhere, email hosted in the cloud is seen as the most reliable option. It is imperative to utilize a reliable cloud email provider who can mitigate all the potential email related risks. In this whitepaper, we offer you a set of questions you should ask your cloud email provider so as to mitigate the risks.

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Introduction

In today's hyper competitive business environment, email is the most important communication tool for most businesses regardless of the sector in which they operate. From intra-office communications to communications with partners and customers, a reliable email service has become the communications lifeline for any business. Employees need reliable and ubiquitous access to email, along with both security and speed. In fact, email is so intertwined with today's business processes that any disruption to email will impact significantly on the business' ability to function.

According to Pingdom, a company focusing on internet availability monitoring, there were 1.4 billion email users worldwide with 90 trillion emails sent in 2009. This number is further going to increase to 1.9 billion users by 2013. This trend is fueled, in part by strong growth in business email. According to a research by The Radicati Group*, the number of corporate email accounts is going to increase from 568 million in 2009 to 691 million in 2013. Similarly corporate email messages sent per day is projected to double from 92 billion to 187 billion by 2013. To cope with this growth and, also, to have a more reliable and ubiquitous solution, businesses are looking for solutions beyond traditional managed solutions. They want a service that is more reliable and more highly scalable than what they currently have. Cloud based email solutions are well suited for these demands.

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In this era where everything from accounting to customer relationship management is available as a service for consumption, there are compelling reasons to outsource email to a cloud email provider. As cloud computing technologies mature, cloud based email solutions are seen more and more as a reliable and easily scalable solution. Cloud based email solutions also result in a lower total cost of ownership (TCO) than traditional email systems and have the benefit of moving the complexities of managing technology away from the organization and putting this burden onto third party providers. With the increasing uptake of Software as a Service (SaaS) and businesses

* Email Statistics Report, 2009-13, The Radicati group Inc

becoming more comfortable with the idea of storing their data remotely, there are a wide variety of choices when it comes to cloud based email. Such a broad range of choices can also make it difficult to select the best provider for the business' email needs. There are many factors that come into play when deciding upon a provider. From cost to security to compliance, businesses need to consider many factors seriously and select a provider who is both reliable and secure. In this whitepaper, we will help you ask some questions to a prospective email service provider before utilizing their services. These questions are designed to help you mitigate the risks and identify a reliable provider that suits your organization's needs.

Ten Questions to Ask Before Moving Your Email to the Cloud

1. How do you ensure the long term viability of an email solutions provider?

Ensuring the vendor's long term viability should be the first item in the buyer's checklist.

Email is a critical component of most businesses today and it is important to check the background of the vendor to ensure their business has long term viability. The primary focus of the vendor should be email with extensive experience with other cloud based infrastructure. Some of the factors that you should consider are:

- The provider should have a long and successful history of providing email and/or other infrastructure services

- It is important to take a look at the company's client list to make sure that the provider can be trusted. If possible, the buyer should talk to some of their clients and gauge their satisfaction with the provider

- Check the company's website to learn about the management team and investors. This information can offer clues about the health of the company

- The buyer should check technology blogs and other online media to see if the provider is covered in these media outlets.

Ensuring the vendor's long term viability should be the first item in the buyer's checklist. Email is a core requirement for business - because of this it is important to ascertain the longevity of the email provider's business.

2. How can you ensure that the email solutions provider can offer the reliability and scalability needed for your business?

Many smaller email providers have reliability problems and cannot scale beyond a few hundred accounts. The buyer should carefully avoid such vendors and go with those who offer highly-scalable, cloud based email solutions. The cloud based email solutions are architected for better reliability and redundancy by avoiding a single point of failure. They are also built for scale, to meet the needs of today's growing enterprises.

In fact, some research that we have conducted with our clients indicates that on-demand email systems have anything from 1-2 hours of downtime (both scheduled and unscheduled) per month whereas cloud based email solutions have much better availability as a result of their architecture. Cloud based solutions often ensure that the email infrastructure is spread across different geographical locations and, thereby, available for users even under natural disasters.

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The advantages of choosing a cloud based email provider also includes scaling. Your organization's needs change with the ever changing business landscape. There may be unexpected need for more storage space and a recruitment drive may result in a need for fast provisioning of new users. Cloud based email solutions are built to handle these requirements. The infrastructure is architected to scale easily and fast whereas a traditional email hosting provider or on-premise solution can generally not meet such instantaneous scaling demands. So, it becomes crucial to select a cloud based vendor to avoid any business disruption.

3. Are their archiving solutions easy to manage?

Most organizations today have a need for email archiving and retention solutions. It is important to make sure that the email service provider offers state of the art archiving, discovery and recovery solutions. The very fact that email is a critical element for an organization makes the ability to automate archiving an important criteria for vendor selection. While evaluating email archiving options, it is important to ensure that the archives are also backed up at an offsite location to protect against natural disasters. Depending on your industry and geographic location, you may want to retain historical emails for legal purposes. If your business requires email retention, it is important to talk to the provider about the retention options and whether they allow fine grained policy management over the retention period. It is also important to make sure that both the discovery and recovery of emails is possible from the archived data. More importantly, the timeline for the discovery and recovery process should be short and meet your needs. The vendor should also have a proper testing procedure to ensure the data integrity in the archival and retention process.

It is important to make sure that the email service provider offers state of the art archiving, discovery and recovery solutions

4. What about the security and privacy of your data and how do they handle compliance requirements?

One of the biggest concerns regarding the outsourcing of email is security. It is important to make sure the email provider performs their own due diligence on the security of the infrastructure, application and core data. The email provider must follow well defined, consistent and tested industry standard security procedures to ensure maximum protection of your data. On the infrastructure side, the vendor should follow the well established datacenter procedures that are usually put in motion at top-tier datacenters. There is no harm in asking to see their documentation detailing security procedures and policies. On the application side, check if they have proper procedures to immediately apply security fixes and other updates. On the data side, it is very important that they offer SSL support to protect customer data during transmission. Depending on your industry, it is important to ensure that they are compliant with PCI DSS data security standards and have SAS 70 certification.

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The moment your data leaves your premises, privacy becomes very important. You should ask the vendor about their privacy policy and make sure it protects both your information as well as your data. It is important to ensure that there are necessary laws to protect the privacy of your information and data in the countries where their infrastructure is located. It also helps to prod them on their policy related to government subpoena. It is important to check if they will legally fight for your privacy or hand it over without fighting hard in the courts. There is no way they can fend off government subpoenas in the case of criminal cases but they should have proper procedures to resist subpoenas on flimsy grounds.

5. Do they offer top of the line protection against spam and viruses?

Another big concern for email users is the amount of spam they receive and the risks associated with viruses sent through the email. Spam email takes a huge financial toll on companies by decreasing productivity of employees. For example, our calculations put the loss suffered by a 100 employee business, getting 50 spam emails per employee per day, at more than $135K per year in lost productivity. It is important to make sure that the email provider employs state of the art spam protection technologies to mitigate these huge costs. Not only should the email provider offer a state of the art spam protection system, they should also commit enough resources for fine-tuning their spam detection technology. Spammers use novel methods to send spam and the provider should be able to stay one step ahead of them in spam protection. This calls for proactive action on the part of the provider - talk to the provider and find out information on their approach. Also, make sure your provider gives email users an option to whitelist and blacklist email addresses/domains. Fine grained control over the spam filter will go a long way in offering a seamless email experience.

It is important to make sure that the email provider employs state of the art spam protection technologies to mitigate these huge costs.

Viruses spread rapidly through email and have a significant impact on business. Insufficient protection against viruses costs large amounts of money to the businesses. It is crucial to check how well the provider protects their customers from viruses and other malicious software. Any virus protection software should be constantly updated for new virus signatures. Make sure your email provider proactively updates their virus database and also offers immediate prevention solutions in the case of new threats. In our observations, we find that a cloud based email provider is usually better positioned to tackle the spam and virus problems because of their ability to scale the infrastructure rapidly to meet any sudden onslaught of these attacks.

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6. *Do they support Data Portability Standards?*

When companies outsource their email to third party email providers, they tend to be worried about storing their data outside of their own premises. Even though these worries are justified, there are ways to mitigate the risks associated with putting data, including email, offsite. This brings into focus the importance of talking to the provider about their terms with regards to data ownership, data portability, etc. The first and foremost thing to ask the provider is about the ownership of your data. There are some providers who attempt to take ownership of the data stored on their infrastructure. So it is vital to ensure that you retain complete ownership of your data.

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Talk to the email provider and find out how easy it is to export email and contacts out of their system. Check with them if they offer POP3 and IMAP access to their email - although it is not as crucial as POP3/IMAP access, check with your provider to see if they offer an option to auto-forward emails to another address. These three features can help you take your email out if you decide to move to another provider. Also, check with them if you can export your address book to formats compatible with other service providers.

7. Do they support browser based webmail and allow access through multiple mobile devices?

Many users prefer to use an internet browser based client, otherwise known as webmail, to access their email. Many people are of the opinion that webmail offers them an easy way to access their email from any internet connected device with a browser. Ask your provider if they offer access through webmail and check out the features. If possible, ask them for a demo and make sure it will fit well into your workflow.

Increasingly, organizations have more and more employees becoming part of the mobile workforce. These users access email exclusively through their smartphones and other mobile phones. According to data released by ABI Research*, the global revenue for mobile messaging services and mobile email is expected to reach USD 48 billion by 2014. This shows the increasing use of mobile phones and smartphones by business users. For mobile workers, lack of mobile access to their email will completely disrupt their workflow. If your organization has a mobile workforce, it is important to make sure that the email provider supports access through smartphones and other mobile devices. Time is crucial for the mobile workforce and it is important for you to make sure the provider also offers an option to push emails to the mobile devices.

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*http://www.abiresearch.com/research/1002957

8. Do they offer Service Level Agreements (SLAs) and have well established guidelines to communicate with customers about downtimes?

A solid SLA is crucial for establishing trust when outsourcing email. The fact that email serves as a backbone for any organization makes SLAs extremely important. Talk to your service provider and check the standards by which they measure their service. Make sure they offer at least a 99.99% uptime guarantee. Even with a 99.99% availability guarantee, there will be service outages beyond the control of the email provider. Check with them and make sure they offer proper compensation for their failure to meet the SLA. A SLA means nothing if the vendor regularly fails to meet it - do some research to find out their historical record with respect to SLAs.

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Also, check with them to see if the process to receive a credit in the event of a breach of the SLA is as simple as possible.

When downtime happens, it is important that you are kept updated on the status of their system. It is important to ask your provider how they will inform you of any unscheduled downtime and keep you posted on the progress. Vendors use anything from blog posts to social media tools like Twitter to keep their customers updated. Knowing how your email provider informs you of downtimes will help you react fast when the service is unavailable.

9. Do they offer migration support?

Migrating emails from an existing in-house system or another provider is no trivial task. Depending on the provider's architecture, the complexity may increase substantially. Check with the email provider to see if they offer migration help. Some providers offer good documentation and video tutorials. Sometimes however the migration may be extremely complex and such documentation will be of limited help. Ask your provider whether they offer professional migration support through their technical support team. A seamless migration is crucial for business continuity and it is important to make sure the provider offers migration support through experienced professionals.

Check with the email provider to see if they offer migration help.

10. How responsive is their customer service?

As mentioned in the question on SLAs, it is important to know how the email provider will keep their customers posted on their status. Apart from their customer updates during downtimes, it is important to gauge how responsive they are for any of your support needs. Ask your provider about their support system, whether they offer telephone, email or helpdesk based support. Check with them about the response times for your support requests. Ask them if these response times are covered as a part of their SLA. An email vendor should be fast and efficient in their response to customer needs. Any delay on their part could impact negatively upon the business so it is very important to ascertain their expected responsiveness to customer requests.

Ask your provider about their support system, whether they offer telephone, email or helpdesk based support.

About Rackspace ™

Fanatical Support® has made Rackspace the world's leader in hosting. Rackspace delivers enterprise-level hosting services to businesses of all sizes and kinds around the world. The company was started in 1998 and since has grown to serve more than 70,000 customers, including over 51,000 cloud computing customers. Rackspace integrates the industry's best technologies for each customer's specific need and delivers it as a service via the company's commitment to Fanatical Support. The core product offerings include Rackspace Managed Hosting, The Rackspace Cloud™ and Rackspace Email & Apps. There are currently over 2,600 Rackers around the world serving customers.

About Diversity Analysis

Diversity Analysis is a broad spectrum consultancy specialising in SaaS, Cloud Computing and business strategy. Our research focuses on the trends in these areas with greater emphasis on technology, business strategies, mergers and acquisitions. The extensive experience of our analysts in the field and our closer interactions with both vendors and users of these technologies puts us in an unique position to understand their perspectives perfectly and, also, to offer our analysis to match their needs. Our Analysts take a deep dive into the latest technological developments in the above mentioned areas. This, in turn, helps our clients stay ahead of the competition by taking advantage of these newer technologies and, also, by understanding any pitfalls they have to avoid.

Our Offerings: We offer both analysis and consultancy in the areas related to SaaS and Cloud Computing. Our focus is on technology, business strategy, mergers and acquisitions. Our methodology is structured as follows:

- Research Alerts

- Research Briefings

- Whitepapers

- Case Studies

We also participate in various conferences and are available for vendor briefings via Telephone and/or Voice Over IP.

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