

Critical Mission

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FEATURED ARTICLE

By
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Online Services *High Availability, Security, Performance on the Cheap*

*Better, faster, more secure – everyone wants the perfect balance of maximum benefits versus lowest cost. There has never been a time with **more options** for achieving the kind of performance and protection that you require at an increasingly reasonable expense. If you run the numbers (we can provide a spreadsheet!) you'll be surprised at what you can save when you consider online services.*

True Cost of an In-House System

When is the last time you totaled up the true cost of the acquisition, installation, configuration and on-going maintenance, updates and replacements of your company's information technology? From my personal experience interviewing customers, the most likely answer is: not recently, if ever.

The reasons why most companies struggle with totaling these costs are a combination of the following:

- It takes too long to come up with accurate numbers.

- There's nothing to which the numbers can be compared.
- Even if you could collect all the numbers: So, what? What do you *do* with the information? Other than wish the numbers were lower.

Recently, Microsoft developed a spreadsheet that makes it easy to enter actual costs when you know them and fudge with adjustable industry averages when you need an informed guesstimate. This takes care of the first problem. From there you can see how your costs stack up against an online services-based equivalent (the second problem). Since these online services actually exist and are available now, you have the information you need to actually **make a decision** and do something about the situation.

The Fear of Gut-Wrenching Change

Alto has been talking to customers a lot lately regarding the shift to online services of one sort or another. One of the most common concerns we hear is a variation on "we're not ready to get rid of our infrastructure and put all our trust in an online service". It is most emphatically **not the case** that you are faced with a gut-wrenching decision to toss some or all of your server hardware and on-premise software and set a date when 100% of your operations go online. Realistically, very few organizations are in a position to make such a switch no matter how motivated.

The real question to be asking is: when do the maximum cost savings and other benefits intersect with the lowest risk and disruption to your business?

For many of our customers there's a clear path to follow, involving a deliberate and measured migration from on-premise to online, over a period of time. This involves coexistence during the transition and on-going integration with the systems that stay on-premise.

Who Does IT Better? At What Cost?

You can divide your business software into two broad categories: commodity systems that perform pretty much the same way in all businesses, and line-of-business systems that are unique or at least highly customized for your particular needs.

Commodity systems include services like e-mail and other forms of electronic communication, file sharing, collecting and collaborating on information, calendar, contact and other list management, and so on. These are activities that many people perform every day, independent of their role in a company or the nature of their business. As such, your IT staff is doing pretty much the same thing as many other companies to support these systems. You would like to hire the best people and run all of this on state of the art hardware. You'd like high reliability and data protection. But it's difficult to justify the expense.

The Old Option: Managed Services

The traditional way of getting better service and support is to engage a managed services organization. While great strides have been made over the years to streamline service delivery and make management more efficient, the fact still remains that the server hardware and other infrastructure still must be purchased or leased, and you end up paying for the managed services staff and overhead. The managed services company cannot provide backup power, alternative communications networks, data recovery and so on unless someone (you) pays for it.

A Better Alternative: Online Services

A key benefit of online services is that you pay a lot less for a much higher level of service and support, compared to handling everything in-house or using a managed services organization. This frees your IT staff to work on things that add value to your company.

For example, Microsoft's **Business Productivity Online Suite** covers the full range of commodity software, and provides top-quality service at a much lower cost.

Business Productivity Online Suite includes Exchange Online, SharePoint Online, Live Meeting and Office

Communicator. All are centrally managed (online, of course!) by your IT staff or you can delegate those tasks to a partner. Other online products from Microsoft include CRM and SQL Server.

Coexistence

By a wide margin, the #1 concern we hear from customers is the fear that e-mail and related communications will be disrupted when they throw a switch and turn off their on-premise Exchange Server. There is simply no way they believe such a transition could occur, no matter how much planning.

The good news is that you don't have to take such a risk. Instead, you get to decide which users move, and when. You control the pace, and you even have the option of hitting the "un do" button if it does not work out. Here are some examples:

Branch Offices or Stores – You can move mailboxes from on-premise to online on a location by location basis, or even just one person at a time, based on whatever pace you can handle. Once a location has been moved and testing proves all is well, you can decommission local servers and stop paying for expensive point-to-point communication lines.

Home/Road Workers – If you're not presently including outside workers, Exchange Online makes it inexpensive and very easy to provide a full set of services. Or, conversely, maybe you're spending a lot of money on licenses and infrastructure that can't be used by outside workers, just so they can have access to corporate e-mail and communications.

Integration

Another commonly voiced concern is losing tight integration, or at least some form of connectedness, between online services and on-premise applications.

The good news here is that despite being online, you're still using Exchange, SharePoint and other Microsoft products and technologies. So unlike a move to Google or other online vendor, you're still working with the same systems and the same kinds of integration opportunities are present.

A particularly exciting capability is provided by Silverlight, Microsoft's portable, client-side software platform. Silverlight is capable of running on your desktop while at the same time connecting to online services like Exchange and SharePoint.

The net result is that even though the servers are somewhere "in the cloud", far away and totally inaccessible to you from a physical standpoint, they're right at your fingertips when Silverlight provides a bridge.

Summary

Making the switch to online services is best accomplished with a measured, deliberate process that seeks the maximum benefit, soonest, and manages risk and disruption. Coexistence and integration options make Microsoft's online products uniquely positioned to make this possible.

If you're curious about Business Productivity Online Suite and want to learn more, Alto offers a Business Productivity Online Suite a training class designed to get you up to speed, fast on the concepts and address all your questions and concerns.

Contact Alto if you'd like a demonstration of any of the products or techniques discussed in this article. Our next solution briefing is devoted to these concepts.

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