



New and sexy

Jason Connolly, director of Next Generation IT, looks at advances in office technology.

When I started this article, I thought about what's new and sexy in office technology; perhaps some killer app that would fundamentally change the way office staff work, or advanced technology that would enable business executives to treble their business without increasing staff levels. For instance, there's no doubt that Apple has made some ergonomically attractive new toys and that VMware are revolutionising the server virtualisation marketplace, but do these really make a difference to the average office?

Brilliant as these innovations are, we believe the biggest technological issue facing clients is far less exciting, but much more serious. There has been an explosion in the use of e-mail for business communication and both staff and technology are struggling to cope.

Online society

In today's always connected and global society, people expect an instant response to e-mails and at all hours of the day. E-mail has become the standard for communication, with volumes increasing exponentially and the use of Blackberries iPhones and web based email access is prevalent. Businesses are just coming to terms with what this means from an operational and also a legal perspective.

The challenge

At a personal level, individuals are facing the challenge of keeping on top of the daily torrent of hundreds of e-mails. E-mail systems are designed for messaging and so aren't very good at the long term storage, organisation and retrieval of e-mails. Technically, many IT managers struggle to cope with the exponential growth in server capacity required to keep up, with many running into capacity restraints of their hardware, or limits in their server software. Many organisations have also not been able to upgrade their systems due to budget constraints and cost cutting exercises. It would seem that the recession has brought

another unwelcome issue with businesses experiencing increased litigation which involves the onerous task of searching through correspondence to provide vital evidence.

Fortunately, we are now starting to see a change in the economy but with limited budgets organisations are looking for cost-effective ways to bolster creaking e-mail systems.

The solutions

In general there are three ways to increase capacity:

1. Upgrade or replace the existing hardware and for those suffering with the limited capacity of Microsoft Exchange 2000 or 2003 Server Software, upgrade to a newer version. This can be an expensive option, but will provide a long-term solution, and if combined with the replacement of other servers, can be included with a server consolidation project. This would also reduce the number of servers within the organisation, leading to savings in hardware costs and ongoing support.
2. Electronic Document Management is a way of organising all records and correspondence into a single centralised electronic system. These systems provide the capability to scan paper files and correspondence, and also integrate with office applications such as Microsoft Word, Excel and Adobe Acrobat so all documents can be stored together. Documents can be filed into a client structure and, importantly, can be indexed for future retrieval. This search technology usually allows staff to search over content of documents for individual words or phrases and has been a useful business tool for the local finance industry over the past decade.

More recently Document Management Systems have adapted to provide tight integration with e-mail software, such as Microsoft Outlook and Lotus Notes, enabling e-mails to be quickly filed against a client file. Key to this is that the software does not

significantly interrupt the business process of sending and receiving e-mails.

The new generation of Document Management Systems improve on that by suggesting the location to store e-mails, depending on where they have previously been saved for any combination of sender and recipient. This level of automation increases office productivity, and also assists with compliance as correspondence is saved against the relevant client file.

3. The system that has most successfully solved this issue locally is specialist e-mail archiving software. This works entirely behind the scenes to automatically extract older e-mails from the server and archive them to another server on the network with more free space. The system cleverly places a 'stub' into the user's e-mail box, which looks like the original e-mail, however, it can be viewed and replied to as normal and so the change is entirely transparent to the end user.

For operational efficiency staff need only keep e-mails they are working on in their mailbox. They can then delete e-mails once they are actioned, safe in the knowledge that they have been archived and can be retrieved in the future. Individual staff members can search the system and restore deleted emails without IT assistance.

The benefits

From a compliance point of view, e-mail archiving provides significant benefits, as the system can be set up to archive all e-mails in a legally compliant locked electronic vault. Compliance managers with the relevant privileges are also able to search and view e-mails across the entire organisation. Furthermore the system can identify documents that have reached their document destruction date, as often keeping an e-mail longer than necessary can be as damaging as not keeping it long enough!

Of course these solutions are not mutually exclusive, and any one, or all of them, may be a suitable solution for your business.