



analysis

Enhanced Email Services really start to come into their own for SMEs

Summary

Two developments have taken place that brings productivity enhancing email and collaboration tools within the reach of even the smallest businesses. They are the growth of hosting services based on enhanced email packages such as Microsoft Exchange and Zimbra CS and the extension of support by these services to mobile devices.

Introduction

For smaller companies (i.e. 5 to 100 mail boxes) running your own server has always been problematic although necessary in the early days of the Internet. Larger businesses have been able to take advantage of enhanced email for a while particularly Microsoft Exchange because they have been prepared to dedicate IT resources to setting up and managing the necessary servers. However as the servers have become more complex even they are questioning whether they should outsource their email. Now with hosting companies such as Simply Mail Solutions offering to take on all the hassle all sizes of organisation can look at taking advantages of these tools

So what is the fundamental difference between POP3 and Enhanced Mail servers??

The function of a POP3 email server is to hold the users mail pending download of the emails. So it was particularly of use for dialup connections where the user connected to the Internet periodically. It is possible to leave email on the server with an option called IMAP. However outgoing email has to go via another server called an SMTP server. This takes in the users email and then directs it across the Internet to the server handling the user's mail. No mail is stored on the SMTP server permanently. Hence in both cases the system is designed to forward and temporarily store users email. (See Figure)

This is where the fundamental difference arises. With Microsoft Exchange or Zimbra CS all mail passing through the server (which replaces both the functions of POP3 and SMTP) is stored by the server along with any attachments. Of course this has significant implications for those running the server (i.e. in terms of storage needed and backup). However for the user it leads to a number of advantages.

For example for many people it is necessary to keep up to date with email continuously. OK so you can get your POP3 email onto your laptop whilst out and about or onto your home pc. However even if you make only one device download the email (and leave the others with the setting "leave mail on server") you will still end up with some email on some devices and not on others (i.e. in the jargon "out of sync"). Neither will you have access to sent email or attachments on each device.

So with an enhanced mail server you set up each device to communicate with the server. It will keep a track of what email is where and make sure that all devices are "synched". It will do this whenever the device is available to the Internet so it works fine with your laptop whenever plugged into your network. With the latest version of Windows Mobile 5 it will also provide push email to Smartphones such as the i-mate K-JAM. This means that you don't even have to ask the device to check for mail – it will automatically download email as soon as received by the server. Finally the email web access facilities are similarly much more sophisticated than you may expect and allow you to do almost everything if you are logged onto a computer through which you only want to have web access to your mail.

To put these things in context now lets imagine that you are out of the office at a conference and

taking a break by looking at your laptop via the wireless network they have provided. You check your email and there is a request for urgent updates to the report you submitted the day before. However you did that work in the office and then emailed it out for approval from your desktop at work! If you have an enhanced email service you just look in your sent box on your laptop and find the email. You can then click on the attachment and it will be downloaded automatically from the server onto your laptop. You can then update it and email it out. Not possible with POP3!

So is it just all about email!

No! In fact once you realise the fundamentally different way that information is being handled by the server you realise what else is possible. For example if you used a PDA such as a Palm didn't you always worry about losing all the information that you put into it?? Addresses, telephone numbers notes etc? And of course if you went to work and left the device at home that was pretty annoying also. If you were systematic and conscientious enough to back up your data to your PC you would only lose the information added since the last backup.

Well the enhanced systems work in the same way as the email. Your contact list on your Windows Mobile 5 device is also synched with the server. So it is available from your desktop and your mobile (and your web interface and laptop!). You can share it with colleagues making team working more feasible. And what happens if your Smartphone does fail? When you install your new one it will just download the data putting you right back where you were!

Calendars

Similarly with your calendar – quite laborious really to key in what you are doing, make changes, keep it all up to date etc. in spite of the nice software. However again copies are on the server providing a back up and making it available to all the devices you use for your email. The collaboration features here also have major benefits – you can share calendars with colleagues and easily set up meeting. Managers can also control the calendars of staff to set up meetings and move things around. No more turning up for meetings that have been rescheduled – all your devices are right up to date. When used with a mobile device this has the big advantage of allowing appointments and reminders to be entered as soon as they arise – so at the end of a meeting or a sales visit for example.

Tasks

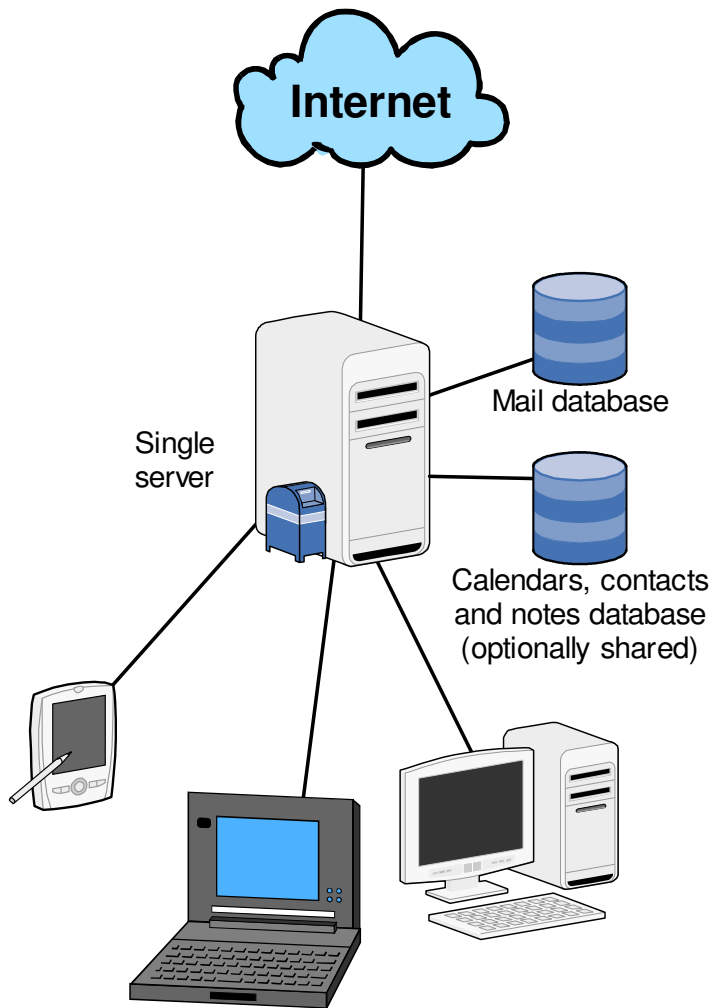
Tasks are a further function of enhanced mail systems. Where as a Calendar will function as a specific reminder in time a task is something that will take time to achieve. So normally it will have a start and end date. When you set it up you can put into different categories to aid review later. Monitoring includes setting items such as % completed, started/in progress/completed. Interestingly tasks can be delegated. You might ask why not just send an email to the person the task is delegated to? Unfortunately this is unfeasible with typical volumes of emails and has no interaction – recipients need to accept tasks and they can then be monitored as progress takes place. However whilst it can be daunting to get lots of email from the boss when you get in the office on a Monday lots of tasks can seem worse! Again the task situation can be monitored from your Mobile if it is Windows 5.

Which system?

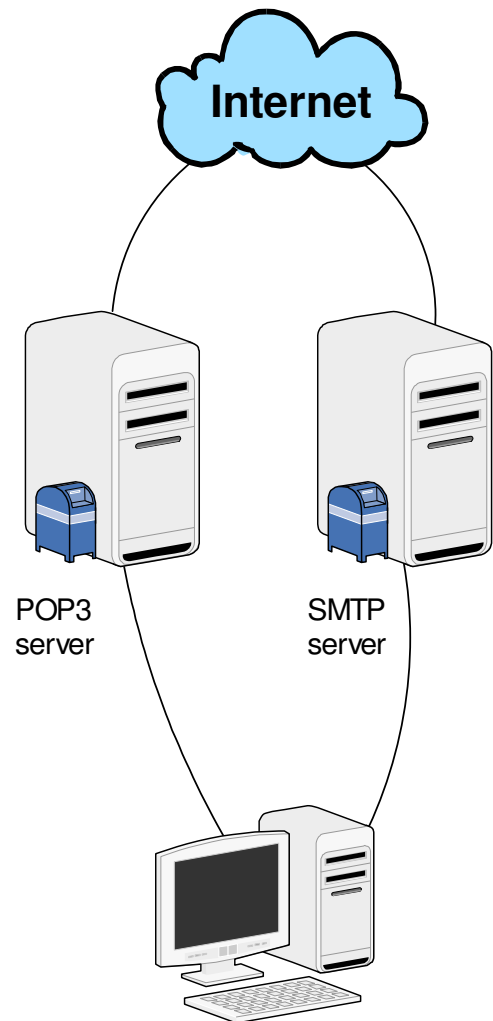
The two leading contenders in this market place are MS Exchange and the Zimbra Collaboration Suite. Both have nice features that may lead you to choose one or the other. MS Exchange is the market leader and, with Windows Mobile 5 devices, offers the best mobile support. Zimbra has the best Web interface (and for some users this might be the preferred option rather than actually running an email client on the desktop) and the best support for Apple Mac and standards generally.

Conclusion: All sizes of business can now take advantage of the extra features available with the latest email systems and significantly leverage their productivity.

Mail Server Systems



Enhanced Mail Server System



POP3/SMTP Mail Server System