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Microsoft
Exchange
Offers Business a Power
Tool for Communication

Buried deep inside Outlook, Microsoft's popular email program, is a collection of powerful business tools that are off-limits to users who lack additional software.

The missing component is Microsoft Exchange, which is a software application that runs on a server. It helps groups of people work together more effectively by allowing information stored in Outlook, such as calendars and contact lists, to be easily shared on a network. It also gives businesses more control over their email, enabling them to set rules that determine things like attachment and mailbox size, acceptable file types, and user customizable addressing.

Communication and collaboration is important for any business, and Exchange can certainly help coordinate these activities. However, a company with a small number of employees, six or less, will most likely not find a sufficient ROI (Return on Investment) of the expense and setup of this application, unless they are running Microsoft's Small Business Server 2003, which includes a condensed version of Exchange, users will likely find it easier and more cost effective to simply rely on phone calls, old-fashioned yelling across or down the hall, and outsourced email vendors.

Following are some of Microsoft's breakdown points of Exchange's benefits that are worth reviewing if you are considering purchasing and installing Exchange.

For the midsize business, Exchange provides some real advantages. As one example, let's say you want to set up a meeting with coworkers. Without Exchange, protocol would have you emailing or calling individuals to check on and confirm availability, making copies of documents to hand out during the meeting, sending an email reminder, and ending with a translation of the discussed topics into neatly typed meeting minutes for distribution or a follow-up email. All in all, it is an arduous process that expends valuable and productive time best used elsewhere.

With Exchange, this process becomes significantly more streamlined and efficient. It is as simple as sending out an email Meeting Request. When coworkers click to accept the invitation, the meeting time and date are automatically added to their Outlook calendars and a list of attendees is generated in the sender's calendar. Everyone is reminded of the meeting via a pop-up window generated by Outlook. By clicking 'Meeting Workspace' as you send out the Request, a shared space will be set up on the company intranet where people can store and access information related to the meeting – thereby eliminating the task of collecting and copying meeting related material.

Additionally, you can use Exchange to configure your email system to the exact specifications you want. Exchange allows for internal centralized control of your email system, allowing real-time updates to the accounts of the entire company. Exchange 2003 also has an Intelligent Message Filter, which uses Microsoft SmartScreen technology to junk spam before it reaches in-boxes. You are also able to accept and distribute the email from multiple domains.

Exchange lets groups of employees utilize Outlook's more advanced communication features. For example, public folders can be set up to share email, documents, agendas, task lists, calendars, and notes related to a specific project. This information can be accessed through Exchange's built in Web Interface, granting secure access to your centralized corporate address lists, calendars, and emails from any internet connection. It is also possible for executives to give an assistant access to add, delete or modify the executive's contacts, calendar entries, etc.

Exchange 2003, the most recently updated release, interacts with the Microsoft Active Directory service, which is a part of Windows into which most users never venture. While Exchange is a complex piece of software that can be fairly difficult to set up and maintain, Microsoft has an excellent how-to guide. However, if the set-up and/or maintenance is something you don't have time for or don't feel comfortable doing yourself, consider hiring an outside consultant. Depending on the size of your network and the amount of data you need to transfer, installation can take anywhere between 4 to 10 hours. Most consultants charge around $150 to $200 an hour for these services. Consultants are often able to perform part of the install as well as make certain updates, add new employee accounts and make various changes remotely, thereby saving you from the money and inconvenience of an on-site visit.

My company uses Microsoft Exchange 2003 and we have found it to be very beneficial during our everyday practices. As a result of the benefits we gained from using the software, we provide procurement, set-up and maintenance of this product to other businesses. You shouldn't believe the Microsoft naysayer – this product can and will make your office more efficient and productive. I have found that there is little that this powerful software can't do.

Bobby J. Davidson is the President of Percento Technologies International. Percento Technologies specializes in providing the technological support necessary for small and medium-sized businesses to succeed in today's world. As your "Part-Time IT Department," Percento will provide you with innovative computer and network systems set-up and maintenance. Percento also offers telecommunication solutions that are both convenient and reliable. We want to be your one-stop shop for all your computer and telephony needs. Bobby can be reached via email at bobbyd@percentotech.com.