

White Paper

Choosing a Microsoft Hosted Solution Service Provider

What questions to ask prospective partners

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Foreword

We live in a world where communication has evolved into the lifeblood of every business. Communication is the hub behind every new opportunity, the keystone in building relationships, the bond that secures company vision and the catalyst that accelerates trade and commerce. It is the most powerful resource for business growth, survival and competitive advantage.

In today's challenging climate, businesses need to work faster and smarter if they are to be competitive and capitalise on the benefits of IT technology solutions.

For many businesses the implementation of a resilient and robust IT infrastructure is a challenging prospect and one which can stretch even the most generous budget. Outsourcing this infrastructure can not only remove unnecessary complexity to your business operations but also eliminate the capital expenditure required to create a similar in house solution.

At a time when businesses are continually trying to improve how they operate whilst scrutinising their expenditure, outsourcing can help meet the technological and financial challenges that businesses are facing.

There are however many things to consider when choosing a prospective outsourcing partner for Microsoft Hosted solutions. This document outlines the key areas that need to be considered.

By choosing a reputable and established provider businesses can amongst a wealth of other advantages, reduce costs, improve efficiency and increase productivity.

Introduction

Regardless of what stage you are at in the sales process there are some very key areas to consider when choosing or short listing a prospective provider. A search for “Hosted Exchange” on some of the largest search engines returns a confusing amount of results, so how can you choose the right provider?.

Following best practices is a good start to choosing a partner, researching via Microsoft’s website will help you pull together an initial shortlist of providers that are Microsoft Certified and have the ability to provide the service that you are looking for.

Once you have your shortlist you can then refine it by asking the important questions in the next section which will also enable you to assess the solution offered against your businesses current and future needs.

The questions are split into different categories, all of which are essential to your decision making. The categories covered are:

- Company Background
- Solution Infrastructure
- Solution Functionality
- Service Level Guarantee
- Set up & Migration
- Data Integrity & Security
- Customer Support
- Mobile Access
- Licensing

Company Background

- 1. What is the primary focus of the business?**
A prospective provider's core business should be based on Microsoft Hosted solutions.
- 2. What experience does the provider have with delivering solutions of a similar type and size to your project?**
Being a large provider does not necessarily mean they have the skills to implement the solution to your business or industry sector.
- 3. How long has the provider been delivering Microsoft Hosted Solutions for?**
Obviously the longer a provider's platform has been established the better.
- 4. Does the provider have references available?**
An established and reputable provider will have case studies and references available.
- 5. What type of partnership does the provider have with Microsoft?**
Microsoft certifications are a good way of judging a providers commitment to the development of their solution. Certifications require proven knowledge, resource and capabilities.
- 6. What is the provider's financial position?**
It is imperative as with any business transaction to check the financial position and any credentials of the provider.

Solution Infrastructure

- 7. What is the provider's platform architecture?**
A prospective provider's solution should be based on Microsoft's Hosted Messaging and Collaboration platform otherwise known as HMC, a provider committed to their platforms development should be operating a HMC 4.0 platform or higher.
- 8. Is the Platform built to Microsoft best practices?**
The platform should be built based on Microsoft's best practices recommendations.
- 9. Are there any single points of failure?**
A reliable platform should have no single point of failure, otherwise known as N+1 redundancy.
- 10. Who provides the server hardware?**
Servers should be sourced from reliable tier 1 hardware vendors.
- 11. Does the provider have multiple data centres and how is data replicated across them?**
For a reliable and robust solution the provider should have more than one data centre with data replicated between them, this is known as mirroring.
- 12. What tier is the data centre/s classified as?**
Tier 1 is lowest possible classification, Tier 2 should be the minimum classification considered.
- 13. Does the provider have a test environment?**
It is imperative that changes to the platform be analysed within a test environment prior to being applied.
- 14. What provisioning tools are available?**
Established providers will have tools to enable businesses to not only create new users but also administer existing ones.

Solution Functionality

15. **Does the solution offer multiple levels of functionality for different users?**

A prospective provider's solution should be able to be customised to meet individual user requirements, this might include add on services like BlackBerry BES, Active Sync for Mobile users or even disc space size and accessibility.
16. **Is a licensed copy of Outlook available with the service?**

The provider should be able to provide a licensed copy of Microsoft Outlook.
17. **Is there a desktop configuration tool available?**

The provider should be able to provide a desktop configuration tool that automatically configures a user's email client for Exchange.
18. **Does the solution support RPC over HTTPS?**

RPC over HTTPS is a way for Outlook to connect securely over the internet to exchange without the need for a VPN client. A provider should include this as standard.
19. **Does the provider support POP/IMAP clients?**

Some users may use such devices as BlackBerry Internet Service or be accessing the service via Outlook express, the provider should allow for POP/IMAP users to connect the service.
20. **Can the user's mailbox be upgraded?**

The solution should allow for a users mailbox to be upgraded easily and without disruption to service.
21. **Can disk space be controlled and upgraded on a per user basis?**

Disk space allocation should be able to be controlled and applied at user level.
22. **Can SPAM settings be customised and does a user get notified of SPAM messages held in quarantine?**

The provider's Anti SPAM solution should allow a user to white and blacklist specific messages, users should also be notified that a message is held in quarantine and have the option to release it.
23. **Are email aliases allowed?**

Business users rarely have one email address, email aliases should be allowed at no extra cost.
24. **Are public folders supported?**

Public folders are a standard feature and should be supported as standard.
25. **Are Distribution lists supported?**

Distribution lists should be supported as standard.

Service Level Guarantee

26. **Does the provider offer a Service Level Guarantee (SLA)?**

The provider should offer an SLA and you should expect at least a 99.5% uptime guarantee.
27. **Does the SLA provide a financial penalty if the provider fails the SLA?**

The provider should stand by their product and offer a money back guarantee for failing to meet the SLA.
28. **Has the provider failed to meet the SLA in the past 24 months?**

Past service performance is a good indicator for likely future performance.

29. What business continuity plans does the provider have in place?

An established provider should have plans in place to get your service up and running following a disaster.

Set Up & Migration

30. What resource is available for the set up of your users?

An established provider should have technical support available to help set up your service.

31. What migration experience and support is available?

An established provider should have sufficient experience of migrating from different email platforms and be able to offer technical support.

32. Are training videos and user guides available?

Providers should have user guides and training videos available to help users perform day to day tasks.

Data Integrity and Security

33. Does the provider perform frequent backups of data, how frequently and how long is data held for?

A reliable provider should perform backups daily and data should be held for at least 5 years.

34. How often are backup and restore procedures tested?

The provider should test restore procedures at least monthly.

35. What Anti Virus protection is included with the solution?

The solution should include Anti Virus as standard and AV systems updated Hourly.

36. Is Anti SPAM protection included with the solution?

The solution should include Anti SPAM as standard, SPAM filters should be able to be controlled at user level and the user should receive notifications for messages held in quarantine.

Customer Support

37. What support level does the provider provide?

An established provider should provide access to a 24x7 support desk.

38. Does the provider run a ticketing system?

The provider should assign a ticket number to each support call raised and enable the user to track progress of the fault.

39. How can faults be logged?

Established providers should provide telephone, email and web portal access to report and track faults.

Mobile Access

40. **Is Outlook Web Access included (OWA)?**
OWA should be included as standard.
41. **Are Windows Mobile devices supported?**
Active Sync should be supported by the provider to enable users with Windows Mobile, Symbian handsets, Android Handsets and iPhones to connect to the service.
42. **Is Microsoft Direct Push supported?**
The provider should support the ability to automatically push emails to mobile devices.
43. **Are BlackBerry Enterprise devices supported?**
The provider should support BlackBerry Enterprise Server devices.

Licensing

44. **Is all licensing included?**
The solution should include all Microsoft, AV & AS licensing as standard.
45. **Are future licensing upgrades included?**
The solution should provide / include future license upgrades as standard.
46. **How is licensing provided?**
The licensing should be bundled in with your monthly service charge, this is known as SPLA licensing. An established provider should license all software using SPLA.

Comparison Table

Question	Our solution	Competitor Solution
What is the primary focus of the business?	Hosted Microsoft solutions	
What Experience does the partner have?	Clients across 20 countries and all industry sectors	
How many years experience does the partner have?	9 years	
Are references available?	Yes	
What Microsoft partnership does the provider have?	Gold Certified	
What is the provider's financial position?	Cash Generative & Profitable	
What is the platform architecture?	HMC 4.5	
Is the platform built to Microsoft best practices?	Yes	
Are there any single points of failure?	No	
What is the server hardware?	Hewlett Packard	
Do you have multiple data centres?	2 x data centres with data mirrored across them	
What tier is your primary data centre?	Tier 3	
Do you have a test environment?	Yes	
What provisioning tools are available?	Intuitive Control Panel	
Are there multiple levels of functionality?	Yes, customised per user	
Is a licensed copy of Outlook available?	Yes	
Is a desktop configuration tool available?	Yes	
Do you support RPC over HTTPS?	Yes	
Do you support POP & IMAP?	Yes	
Can mailboxes be easily upgraded?	Yes, via the Control Panel	
Can disk space allocation be controlled per user?	Yes	
Can SPAM be controlled at user level?	Yes	
Are email aliases supported?	Yes, unlimited	
Are public folders supported?	Yes, unlimited	
Are distribution lists supported?	Yes, unlimited	
Do you provide an SLA?	Yes, 99.9% availability	
Does it provide a money back guarantee?	Yes	
How often have you failed your SLA in the last 24 months?	None	
Do you have business continuity plans in place?	Yes	
Is resource available to support the set up of new users?	Yes	
What migration experience do you have?	Numerous migrations from Exchange, Lotus, GroupWise and many others	
Do you have user guides and training videos?	Yes	
Do you perform frequent backups?	Yes. Daily. Data retained for 5 years	
How often is your backup and restore procedures tested?	Monthly	

What Anti Virus is included?	Trend, Updated Hourly	
What Anti Spam is Included?	Barracuda	
What support level do you provide?	24x7x365	
Do you have a ticketing system?	Yes	
How can faults be logged?	Phone, email & Web portal	
Is Outlook Web Access included?	Yes	
Are Windows Mobile devices supported?	Yes	
Is Microsoft Direct Push supported?	Yes	
Do you support BlackBerry Enterprise Server?	Yes	
Is all licensing included?	Yes	
How do you provide your licensing?	Via the Microsoft SPLA program	

Summary

This document sets out and identifies the key requirements that any potential provider of Microsoft Hosted solutions should adhere to. It also enables businesses to compare and assess not only the solution but also the technical architecture and capabilities of the provider.

Outsourcing doesn't mean losing control or performance. A successful implementation should enable the business to streamline its operation whilst also improving efficiency, improving productivity and also reducing costs. Key to this however is also delivering the solution over a secure and reliable infrastructure that can be expanded and adapted to meet the needs of the business as and when it needs it.

Any further information that is required that is not included in this document can be obtained by contacting:

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