

FOOTWEAR COMPANY STEPS UP TO OFFICE 365

Donald J Pliner's Office 365 rollout affords users access to their applications and files from any device, says CIO Jeff Moss.

Donald J Pliner migrates email to the cloud with the help of CDW and SkyKick.

At a Glance

COMPANY: Donald J Pliner

LOCATION: Headquartered in White Plains, N.Y.

EMPLOYEES: 150

TECHNOLOGY SUPPORT TEAM: four, plus two outside technical consultants

SUMMARY: Founded in 1989, Donald J Pliner sells luxury footwear and accessories online and in specialty boutiques and high-end department stores across the country, as well as in its own retail stores in Houston; Las Vegas; Miami; New Orleans; Orlando, Fla.; and San Jose, Calif. The company has offices in Miami and White Plains, N.Y.

For the past two years, Donald J Pliner CIO Jeff Moss has been planning an IT infrastructure upgrade for the designer footwear and accessory company. Eyeing systems and applications that could meet the growing demand for the brand without overwhelming IT staff, Moss decided to begin with Microsoft Office 365.

"I came from the old school, where reliance on internal IT was the rule. It gave you a lot of control, but also overhead and other pain points," says Moss. "I wanted an IT infrastructure that would scale across the next five years, and I knew that meant moving to the cloud."

Moss had followed Office 365's development since its launch in 2011. Now, seeking to offload the burden of maintaining an on-premises mail server, he found the cloud service to be a perfect fit. The software subscription includes Microsoft's ubiquitous productivity applications — Outlook, Word, Excel and PowerPoint — along with collaboration tools such as Skype and the internal social networking application Yammer. Microsoft manages the software and associated files in its cloud environment.

Microsoft's addition of mobile device management features to Office 365 in 2013 made it highly useful to Donald J Pliner. The company sells luxury footwear and accessories through specialty stores and upscale department stores such as Neiman Marcus and

Nordstrom, in addition to the company's online sales operation and its retail stores in cities such as Houston, Las Vegas and Miami.

"We have a lot of sales reps on the road, and the ability for them to have access to the applications they need and for us to manage the apps on any mobile device was an important part of our thinking," Moss says.

Picking a Partner

Having made the decision to deploy Office 365, Moss was left with the daunting prospect of migrating Donald J Pliner's email and productivity applications from on-premises hardware and software to Microsoft's cloud data center. He was also concerned about support should anything go wrong with the service after his company signed on.

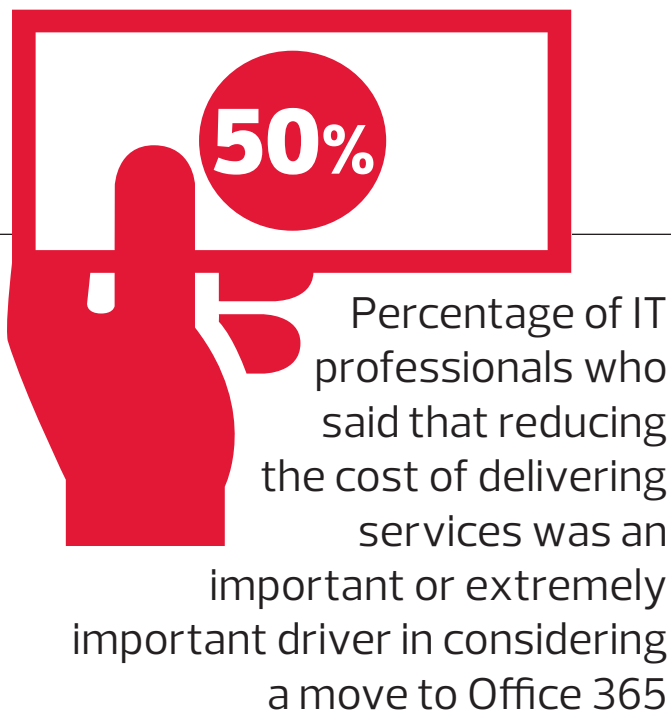
Last summer, Moss took his concerns to his longtime CDW account representative, Jaynellen Lane-Schultz. She recommended the Office 365 from CDW program: CDW would handle the licensing, design and execution of the rollout and provide 24/7 support for the customer's Office 365 implementation. As part of the program, CDW partner SkyKick can be enlisted to manage most aspects of the migration, providing the customer with oversight while freeing up time and resources.

"The real reason we were able to get this done was that CDW put everything together," Moss says. "And the CDW support that comes after the implementation makes the program well worth it for the peace of mind it gives. We never have to contact Microsoft after hours and get a call center. We really feel comfortable with the partnership we've built with CDW over the years."

The Office 365 from CDW program is new, but it's consistent with the company's view of its relationship with customers, says Lane-Schultz. "We're not just here to sell stuff," she notes. "Our goal is to find the right technology for the customer's situation and then make sure that everything works, from the project design and the implementation to any problem that comes up later."

Lane-Schultz set up an initial engagement call with CDW specialists to discuss the scope of the Donald J Pliner project and the type and number of Office 365 licenses the retailer would need.

"We explore the pain points the organization is trying to address with Office 365 and find a licensing plan that fits its needs," says Michael Genovese, a CDW business productivity licensing specialist. "Other specialists offer their input about how the customer can implement the service to meet their goals. My job is to keep the customer legal for the least amount of money."



SOURCE: Osterman Research, "Best Practices for Migrating to Office 365," April 2015

Cleaning House

Moss and his IT team spent several weeks laying the groundwork for the move to Office 365. First, they evaluated the needs of all the company's users to determine which could be met by the Office 365 Business Essentials license and which would require the extra features of the Business Premium license. Both licenses provide business-class email hosting with 50-gigabyte mailboxes; web versions of Office 2016 (including Outlook, Word, PowerPoint and Excel); 1 terabyte of storage and file-sharing; and high-definition video conferencing with Skype for Business. The premium license also provides the desktop version of Office 2016 and access to the applications on up to five devices.

The next step was a thorough housecleaning of mailboxes and Active Directory in preparation for the move to the cloud. "We wanted to get rid of anything that was unused or out of date before the migration started — we went through Active Directory with a fine-toothed comb," says Moss. "You have an option to go through the winnowing process with SkyKick in the middle of the migration, but we wanted to do it in advance so our roadmap of what we wanted to migrate was clear."

As further preparation, Moss and his team merged the active and archived mailbox accounts that had been separate in the on-premises Exchange server to ensure that all messages would be migrated to Office 365. Since the migration this fall, Donald J Pliner has turned on the online archive feature of Office 365 to safely store older messages.

"Not every company will have to go through what we did in advance, but email is a mission-critical app, and it's important to our people that they can reference emails from as long as two or three years ago," says Moss.

The business's concerns are common among organizations making the move to Office 365, says Vanessa Thompson, research vice president at IDC. Eliminating the need to manage Exchange (or any email system) onsite is one of the most popular reasons for moving to Office 365, although email is also one of the most painstaking — and sometimes painful — parts of the migration, she says.

"The cost in time and money to support email on-premises is the biggest single driver to Office 365 and the cloud," says Thompson. "And the major pain points are felt when organizations aren't ready to migrate and have no experience with the move. Especially for SMBs, a partner can smooth the process considerably."

Retaining Control

Moss was able to closely monitor the migration to Office 365 with tools provided by SkyKick, and to make decisions about the process as it unfolded.

More than Migration

Changing how mission-critical services like email and productivity software are delivered is a daunting prospect, says Donald J Pliner CIO Jeff Moss. To ease the way, the Office 365 from CDW program provides guidance and support customized to the needs of individual organizations.

"Each customer has a different environment — it's important not to have a cookie-cutter solution if it's going to work for them," says CDW Senior Consulting Engineer Veronica Abbey-Falodun.


There are three key aspects to CDW's complete Office 365 solution.

Discovery and preparation: Defining the scope of the project and assessing the IT environment and organizational needs are the first steps. A CDW Office 365 licensing specialist can then craft a licensing plan that meets the customer's requirements at the lowest possible cost. The CDW technical staff works with the customer on issues such as hardware deployment, integrating Office 365 with existing identity and authentication solutions and preparing mailboxes for the migration.

Execution: As part of its customized approach, CDW will advise and assist customers that choose to perform the Office 365 migration themselves through Microsoft's built-in Exchange migration portal, or will bring in partner SkyKick to manage the move. SkyKick has created tools to facilitate the migration and to provide customers with full transparency, and has been particularly effective in negotiating permissions when a customer is migrating from another hosted service to Office 365, Abbey-Falodun says.

Ongoing support: Beyond the migration, Office 365 from CDW provides 24/7 support, replacing the Microsoft offshore help desk with immediate assistance from experts who understand the customer's unique environment, says CDW Technical Support Specialist James Kehoe.

Licensing and configuration protocols are the most common problems that CDW specialists address, but the support team is ready to deal with any issue pertaining to Office 365. "We don't want to take people to the cloud and then leave them there without the support they need," Kehoe says.



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"SkyKick gives you a lot of extra controls you wouldn't have if you tried to do the migration yourself," he says. "They put a nice interface on the process, where you can set it and watch it happen. You receive alerts if there are any problems — if users haven't set up their passwords to get onto Office 365, or if there are license issues, for example. They automate the process so that it's much less nerve-racking."

There was no downtime for Donald J Pliner users during the migration process, though there was a slight but noticeable increase in application response time on the Exchange server before the final cutover to Office 365. Because of the importance of email to users, Moss asked SkyKick to repeat the standard 48-hour sweep of the on-premises system to make doubly sure that no messages were lost in the transition.

From a user's perspective, the migration of email and contacts was seamless, says Thien Levan, vice president of IT for e-commerce and retail operations at Donald J Pliner. The most challenging part of the switch to Office 365 for users has been gaining familiarity with the Office 2016 applications, which replaced the Office 2010 software the company had been running on-premises, he says.

Offering advice to other organizations preparing to deploy Office 365, Levan stresses the importance of end-user training. "People don't like change, so any difficulty with something new is magnified," he says. "The more training you can provide, the better."

"From the IT side, going to Office 365 is great — we will be able to manage and share information much more

easily," Levan adds. "We just have to help our users understand the change."

Users will appreciate the improved access Office 365 provides to their applications and files from anywhere and on any device, says Moss. For IT, the benefits of the move are already apparent. The security provided by Office 365 is a step up from Donald J Pliner's already rigorous measures, and disaster recovery is much easier from the cloud, he says.

While the IT department has offloaded the burden of managing the Exchange server, the team still has control over all aspects of the communication and productivity applications through a portal that offers features such as Active Directory Integration and Exchange administration.

"The manageability built into Office 365 is fantastic," Moss says. "Microsoft gives you a comprehensive, intuitive set of tools that lets you manage users and email much more easily than we could before."

Moss sees the increased use of cloud services as inevitable — and welcome, because they free IT to concentrate on innovation and development.

"Rather than having our staff just maintain hardware, deploy patches and service packs, and wonder whether this piece of equipment or software is up or down, we can focus on pushing the envelope, thinking about how IT can contribute to the future of the company," Moss says. "This is our first step in that direction, but there will be many more."



Learn more about CDW's Microsoft Office 365 plans, migration and 24/7 support at CDW.com/Office365.