CDW PEOPLE WHO GET IT

THE THRILL OF A HUMDRUM TRANSITION

Now that BackOffice Associates employees have had a taste of an enterprise e-mail system, they're hungry for more, says IT Technician Devon Crowl.

A Massachusetts firm got just what it was looking for in moving its e-mail to the cloud: an uneventful migration that yielded significant savings and operational improvements.

At a Glance

COMPANY: BackOffice Associates LLC

HEADQUARTERS: South Harwich, Mass.

EMPLOYEES: 538

INTERNAL I.T. SUPPORT STAFF: 3

BUSINESS: In 1996, BackOffice Associates created a new way of delivering data for enterprise resource planning implementations and redefined the meaning of data quality for fully integrated ERP systems. The company has become a worldwide leader in data migration and information governance solutions, with a concentration on enhancing ERP data. BackOffice Associates' products and services address the needs of business and IT users seeking to unlock the value of their data assets. The company is headquartered in Massachusetts with additional offices in the United States, Europe, Asia, India, Australia and Mexico.

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55% of enterprises are expected to adopt cloud-based e-mail and collaboration services by 2020.

SOURCE: Gartner

Moving massive amounts of data from legacy enterprise resource planning systems to a new ERP system can be a challenge.

But it's a challenge that BackOffice Associates gladly takes on. The 16-year-old company, with offices around the globe, helps some of the world's largest organizations migrate their mission-critical data.

When the data migration process gets exciting, that usually means something has gone wrong. That's the last thing major enterprises want to hear when it comes to their data.

BackOffice Associates recently underwent its own major transition — from a legacy e-mail architecture to a new cloud-based system — with the help of CDW. In January 2012, it migrated from an aging Post Office Protocol (POP) e-mail system to Exchange Online, part of Microsoft's Office 365 suite. Truth be told, the company is pretty excited about it.

A Cause for Change

BackOffice Associates' transition began when a new CEO took the reins last fall. The CEO wanted to be able to check his e-mail and update his calendar from his BlackBerry, as he had at his previous company. He was shocked to discover that he couldn't. The reason? The company's legacy e-mail system.

At the time, BackOffice Associates' 500-plus employees were still using Microsoft Outlook to download e-mail from POP servers, explains IT Technician Devon Crowl. That meant all e-mail was stored locally on a user's machine — whether that machine was in South Harwich, Mass.; BackOffice Associates' development shops in Austin or Atlanta; or its Asian headquarters in Singapore. Users had no centralized system for searching e-mail or backing up message stores, and no way to synchronize contacts or calendars, says Crowl.

Users were at risk of losing most of their e-mail if their hard drives crashed. There was no calendar

Why Office 365?

For a global organization such as BackOffice Associates, moving to a cloud-based e-mail and calendar system makes a world of sense. But with a growing number of software as a service choices, how does an organization pick the right one?

Dan Balchunas, a technical specialist for CDW's Office 365 team, who worked with Devon Crowl to hone BackOffice Associates' selection process, says a handful of factors drove the decision to go with Exchange Online, a component of Office 365.

First, the move didn't require a major culture change. BackOffice Associates employees were already familiar with the desktop version of Microsoft Outlook, making the transition almost seamless, he says.

"That meant no learning curve for users, which also meant no need for training and not a lot of overhead for support after the solution was implemented," Balchunas says. "And then there were things that sound simple but really aren't, like calendar sharing. Office 365 made it easy to manage users and tie in mobile devices, all things BackOffice wasn't able to do with its old system but really wanted."

Another factor, says Balchunas, was Microsoft's service-level agreement, which provides for financial compensation if Office 365 fails to meet its reliability promises.

"That's unique in this industry," he says. "And when there's downtime, the clock starts ticking immediately. A lot of other organizations don't start counting until a system has been down for at least 10 minutes."

Finally, CDW's familiarity with Office 365 and its ability to offer full implementation services via its strategic partners sealed the deal.

"One of the reasons this project was so successful was that not only could CDW offer pre-sale expertise and software licensing, but we also were able to do the full deployment for BackOffice Associates and in a relatively short timeframe," Balchunas says. "The ability to assist from start to finish is, I think, a very big advantage for CDW."

synchronization. If people read their e-mail on their notebooks, the messages would still be marked as new in their inbox when they returned to the office.

The situation came to a head last fall, Crowl says.

The new CEO was used to having an enterprise mail system. For him to return to a POP mail environment was like going back in time. He told the IT team, "We need to get this addressed, and fast." That was the real driving force behind getting to an enterprise mail system with calendars and contacts that could sync across multiple devices.

In October 2011, BackOffice Associates began examining its e-mail options. By December, it had decided to use Microsoft's Exchange Online. Working with CDW's Office 365 team and partners, Crowl mapped out an aggressive strategy for deployment.

Before it could begin work, however, the team had to perform discovery to understand BackOffice Associates' messaging environment: the types of objects, devices and operating systems that were included; what software it was using for spam filtering; and what mobile devices needed to connect to the network.

"Once we completed discovery, we devised a strategy for the project," says Dan Balchunas, a technical specialist for CDW's Office 365 team. "Because every organization's environment is a little different, we tweaked the plan accordingly."

In mid-December, the team began migrating users' mailboxes to the new environment in batches of roughly 100 employees. This approach gave BackOffice Associates and its third-party support provider time to set up each group of mailboxes, ensure everything was working and troubleshoot if needed. Within just a few weeks, the team had completed its deployment of 538 seats of Exchange Online Plan 1. Roughly 100 of those seats were designated to the company's headquarters, with the rest spread out to locations as far away as Bangalore, India, and New South Wales, Australia.

The only glitch, Crowl says, was that once a user was moved to Exchange Online, he or she had to log on immediately with a user name and password in order to receive external e-mail. A handful of remote users who checked messages less frequently were caught unaware, but that problem was quickly rectified.

"We sent out notifications to everyone, informing them they had to respond promptly and log in to their Exchange accounts," he says. "We have a large number of consultants in the field. A few of them didn't see the notice at first but were quickly brought up to speed."

POP Goes the E-Mail

The difference between using POP mail and cloud services for e-mail is astounding, says Crowl.

"We still access our mail using Outlook, but now we can call up other users' calendars, see when they're free, and instantly request a meeting," he says. "We can share contacts with other users in the organization seamlessly. We had e-mail distribution lists with our old system, but it was challenging to keep them updated. With the new system, we can see the most up-to-date version of any list. And getting BlackBerry services connected was big. Being able to have our CEO watch his contacts sync up seamlessly via the cloud, that was real joy for him."

Crowl says having e-mail hosted in the cloud also saves time and money for his tiny IT staff.

"We no longer have the overhead of maintaining and housing hardware and procuring new server and user licenses — all the additional requirements attributed to running an Exchange server in-house," he says. "We don't have to think about upgrading our Exchange environment every three or four years or worry about securing local and offsite backups. Even though storage costs have come down a lot over the years, it still adds up pretty quickly."

Managing Data Migration

The modern world runs on data as much as it does on electricity. Moving that data safely from one system to another with no interruptions is as essential as making sure current flows from a power plant to homes and workplaces.

For 16 years, BackOffice Associates has been a worldwide leader in data migration and information governance solutions, specializing in enhancing data quality for enterprise resource planning systems. Offering customers its technology, methodology and consulting services, the company solves data migration and information governance issues across all industries, company sizes and project complexities.

That's why BackOffice Associates' roster of clients includes the biggest makers of consumer products, pharmaceuticals, heavy machinery, and food and beverages in the world, as well as leading members of the oil and high-tech industries.

Company information is available at *boaweb.com*.

Photography by Jason Grow

Crowl says that moving toward an enterprise e-mail and scheduling system is a wise choice even for relatively small companies, not just global organizations.

"If your organization has more than 10 or 12 users, you should be on some kind of enterprise mail platform, even if it's not Exchange," he says.

> "We no longer have the overhead of maintaining and housing hardware and procuring new server and user licenses."
>
> — BackOffice Associates IT Technician Devon Crowl

Making the Move

Moving 500-plus users from a desktop environment to Office 365 is not as intimidating as it sounds, says Jonathon Martinucci, the CDW account manager who worked with BackOffice Associates.

"Migrating users to Office 365 is not as big a challenge as you might think it would be," he says. "We looked at the size of this implementation on paper and spent a lot of time talking about how to do it efficiently without creating a headache for the end users. But it went so smoothly we started looking at what else from the Microsoft portfolio we could move in here. This is a great example of how Office 365 solved an everyday problem in a relatively big environment."

BackOffice Associates is pretty happy with how far they've come in such a short time.

"Our users really like the new system," Crowl says. "When our CEO announced at our holiday party last December that we were moving to Exchange Online, he got a big applause. That fact alone tells you how our people received the idea of moving to an enterprise mail system."

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