How To Choose The Right Email Solution For Your Business

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Making Leaders Successful Every Day

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Introduction

There are very few who would argue that email is not a business-critical resource for companies today. With cloud-based email solutions on the rise, companies are faced with yet another option for providing email to their workforce. With cloud, alongside other standalone email platforms and packaged solutions, how do you decide what's the right choice for your company? What factors will steer the decision one way or another?

In December 2010, Microsoft commissioned Forrester Consulting to analyze the criteria companies use to purchase an email platform. Forrester Consulting surveyed 400 IT and business decision-makers from North American companies about the challenges they see with email organization and how they prioritize criteria. By surveying both IT and business decision-makers, you can see how both IT and the business view these issues and where they start to diverge.

Out of the myriad of factors a company can consider when choosing an email platform, there's a subset that is important in helping guide email deployment options. Furthermore, for each criterion, there are different levels of functionality for each. Companies need to consider both IT and business factors in business priorities alongside IT ones to assess these key criteria and match them to strengths of deployment options in order to help choose the best email platform for their own organization.

It's likely that an email decision is looming in your immediate future. The remainder of this paper focuses on distilling the dizzying number of factors to consider to the top 10 that will matter to most businesses and how they feed into deciding on your next email platform. As you're reading through, keep these key takeaways in mind:

- **Make this a business-influenced IT decision.** There's a clear split in priorities and requirements across IT and the business when it comes to email. Ultimately, email is a tool used by the business to meet its own goals and help ensure profitability — so IT must keep its ears open and listen to its business stakeholders to make sure their requirements are met. Failing to meet their requirements and expectations compromises the positive impact and reduces the effectiveness of the people who drive revenue.

- **Assess and match key criteria to your deployment choice.** You can use the figures from the study as a starting point to see what your peer organizations are doing, but naturally, every company is different, and you can't rely on benchmark figures alone. You will have to survey both business stakeholder peers and infrastructure and operations and security professionals to ensure that your email choice meets both business and technical requirements for your company.

- **Take a cloud-first approach.** The benefits of a cloud-based solution for email, like upfront infrastructure cost avoidance, an easier route to staying current on the latest platform, and the opportunity to offload responsibility to a domain specialist, are hard to ignore. Perform a thorough evaluation of your employee requirements, application integration needs, security and regulatory requirements, and comprehensive costs to determine if it's right for you. The cloud isn't ready for everyone yet, but if you're not anchored by legacy application integration requirements or stringent regulatory requirements, it's hard to come across a reason not to make the move. Even if your organization isn't ready for the cloud, performing an evaluation will give you insight into what needs to change before you can make the move.

- **Think about your broader collaboration strategy.** The choice of your email platform is not a decision that should be done in isolation. Email is but one tool in your broader messaging and collaboration strategy. So IT pros must consider the functionalities that may be enabled by looking at what they require from communication

tools like instant messaging or other collaboration tools like team workspaces. The ability to integrate these services and include capabilities like presence or carrying of a communication across different media can be powerful productivity enhancers. Think carefully about email alongside other collaboration and communication solutions so that you don't lose that opportunity to amplify your employees.

Assess Your Own Email Requirements To Choose Your Next Platform

There are so many criteria that you might consider when choosing your next platform. We've narrowed down the list based on respondent email approaches and priorities. In order to better visualize critical selection criteria and the different options that you might use for each, we've assembled a table ranking different options on a simplified scale of "good, better, best" (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Ten Email Criteria Every Company Should Consider

Criteria	Good	Better	Best
Mailbox size	Less than 1 GB mailbox	1 GB to 5 GB mailbox	More than 5 GB mailbox
Email client	Web-only email client or limited installed client support (i.e., POP mail)	Full email installed client with server integration	Segmented offering, allowing for both approaches for the appropriate employee segments
Security (antivirus/antispam)	Basic antispam and antivirus protection with daily updates	Previous, plus an SLA for filtering effectiveness and false positives	Previous, plus advanced spam reports, multiengine antivirus protection, and customizable quarantine controls
Compliance features	Personal email signatures for compliance messages	Companywide policies that attach email disclaimers	Advanced compliance scanning that ensures that inappropriate information isn't sent (i.e., Social Security Numbers)
High availability	Best effort for uptime	99% availability SLA	99.9% availability or greater
Disaster recovery	Infrequent off-site backup	Regular off-site backup, one-day recovery time	Continuous replication with a remote site, one-hour or better recovery time
Support options	Online support or forums	Previous, plus basic phone support	Multiple support options, including 24x7 advanced support with escalation
Mobile email options	Basic mobile email access (i.e., POP mail)	"Push" mobile email access for multiple platforms	Previous, plus device management capabilities
Integration options for business applications	Provides basic SMTP integration	Published APIs to integrate with the platform	Widely adopted, standardized APIs to integrate with the platform
Email archiving/eDiscovery	Basic inbox journaling	Customizable email archiving	Previous, plus advanced legal hold and search capabilities

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Microsoft, February 2011

Challenges Drive Businesses To Rethink And Upgrade Their Email

Email is a business-critical application for most companies today. Businesses rely on email for communication among their employees, partners, and customers — even applications use email as a part of workflow. Email is not without its problems though — rapidly evolving business challenges, like regulations that require email accountability, security challenges, and the need to ensure sensitive information doesn't leak into the wrong hands, are but a few challenges businesses face. A difficult economy has delayed many email migrations — but that's subsided. Nearly half of those we surveyed plan on making an upgrade in the next 12 months. Upgrades are not without challenges though. Customers, both large and small, face a growing number of criteria and options for their next email platform.

Business Users And IT Carry Different Views Of Their Email Woes

Email is no longer simply provisioning email accounts for employees — there's a growing number of challenges companies face in this seemingly simple service. Today, companies must deal with evolving employee requirements like mobility and larger mailboxes, increasingly dangerous security issues, and even external influencers like regulatory compliance. In surveying both the business and its IT decision-maker peers, we see both unique and shared viewpoints of the email challenges they witness in their own organizations.

- **Midmarket companies struggle with storage.** Fifty-one percent of midmarket companies cited dealing with email storage as one of their top three email challenges. Second to storage, 44% also cited the ability to give their employees the latest tools available as another difficulty. Supporting their increasingly mobile workforce is the third biggest challenge with midmarket companies. Midmarket companies also were more likely to cite email availability as more of a challenge than enterprises. Enterprises usually have greater economies of scale for infrastructure that they can contribute to applications like email.

- **Enterprises are slower to move to newer tools.** Like their midmarket counterparts, enterprise customers also cited storage and keeping employee tools current as two of their top challenges, with a frequency of 46% and 47%, respectively. Forty-three percent mentioned difficulties in handling mergers and acquisitions as one of their top three challenges. This challenge also commonly surfaces in conversations with Forrester clients — bringing in a new business can carry a great deal of complexity with it. Business services and financial services companies cited this issue more than other industries did.

- **IT feels the email storage pains the most.** When separating IT from business decision-makers, you can see that it's the IT pros who feel more of the burden of corporate storage problems, with 51% selecting that challenge (see Figure 2). Forty percent also pointed to email archiving and eDiscovery challenges as a top concern, as opposed to only 26% of business stakeholders. Why the disconnect? In addition to the storage burden that comes along with it, archiving and eDiscovery solutions can be complex and resource-intensive.

- **Business decision-makers are frustrated by slow upgrades.** Though all groups frequently mentioned the difficulty of having the latest tools as a challenge, business decision-makers were the most vocal. In fact, it was the most frequent choice with fifty percent citing this issue. Business decision-makers also slightly outpaced their IT counterparts on issues like security and availability. Media and financial services companies were more likely to invest in higher-end email compliance solutions.

Figure 2

Top Corporate Email Woes That Fuel Upgrades Based On Company Size And Role (IT Versus Business)

"Please select your top three biggest challenges with your current email platform."

	Midmarket		Enterprise	
	IT	Business	IT	Business
1	We struggle to keep up with employee email storage requirements	Our email is dated, and employees need more updated tools	We struggle to keep up with employee email storage requirements	Our email is dated, and employees need more updated tools
2	Our email is dated, and employees need more updated tools	We struggle to keep up with employee email storage requirements	We have difficulties related to archiving/eDiscovery for email	It's difficult for us to quickly integrate new acquisitions or mergers into the platform
3	It's hard to manage delivering email to our increasingly mobile workforce and its non-PC devices, including smartphones and tablets	It's hard to manage delivering email to our increasingly mobile workforce and its non-PC devices, including smartphones and tablets	Our email is dated, and employees need more updated tools	We struggle to keep up with employee email storage requirements

Base: 400 North American IT and business decision-makers

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Microsoft, February 2011

Priorities For Your Next Platform Should Include Business And IT Concerns

Unsurprisingly, when thinking about their next email platform, priorities for email selection criteria differed in some cases depending on the size of the company as well as the role (see Figure 3). Midmarket IT tends to focus most on supporting services like mail filtering or content security, while enterprise IT decision-makers prioritize considerations like the ability to tier email. For enterprises, a tiered approach to email services levels can map to big savings on their overall email investments. Business decision-makers' priorities tend to focus more on giving their employees the tools they need to drive the business forward. For instance, in the enterprise, business decision-makers prioritize mailbox size and fit with the broader collaboration tool set more so than their IT counterparts. What can you take away from this? It's no surprise there are issues that separate larger and smaller companies. However, any set of requirements is incomplete without both business and IT requirements. Based on the current approach and email evaluation priorities of survey respondents, you can envision example organizations:

- **A midmarket manufacturing firm.** In this organization, the budget for email platform doesn't allow IT to invest in the infrastructure required to provide employees with larger mailboxes, ensure higher email uptimes, or provide aggressive RPOs or RTOs in the case of a disaster. This company doesn't have an archive solution today but is looking to incorporate this into its next email platform. IT in the organization has been heavily focused on operations and has little time to innovate and bring newer solutions to the business.

- **Enterprise financial services company.** For this company, factors like having the largest possible mailbox take a backseat to meeting external regulatory compliance regulations. This company is heavily invested in an on-premises archiving and eDiscovery platform that also stores other content types and offers limited cloud email support. It also has significant integration requirements with many legacy applications that need to tie into email,

as well as other collaboration and communication tools that require a greater degree of control over the email server.

Figure 3
Email Priorities Of IT And Business Decision-Makers

"How important are the following considerations when deciding on your next email platform?"

	Midmarket		Enterprise	
	IT	Business	IT	Business
1	How the email platform fits into our broader collaboration strategy tools	Mobile/smartphone email access options	Email platform ease of use for employees	How the email platform fits into our broader collaboration strategy tools
2	Archiving/compliance capabilities	Email platform ease of use for employees	Content security/digital rights management capabilities	Mobile/smartphone email access options
3	Mailbox size	Integration with existing mail-enabled applications	Mail filtering or hygiene capabilities	Mailbox size
4	Mobile/smartphone email access options	How the email platform fits into our broader collaboration strategy tools	Integration with existing mail-enabled applications	Integration with existing mail-enabled applications
5	Integration with existing mail-enabled applications	Archiving/compliance capabilities	Archiving/compliance capabilities	Archiving/compliance capabilities

Base: 400 North American IT and business decision-makers

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Microsoft, February 2011
Note: Top five ranked priorities are shown.

Email Priorities Influence Your Decision Between On-Premises And Cloud-Based Email

One of the biggest decisions a company faces is whether or not its next step for email should be a cloud-based service. Cloud-based solutions have a lot to offer, including the opportunity to reduce operational costs, refocus staff on core business-centric tasks, avoid upfront infrastructure costs, and even avoid the complete burden of a platform upgrade. There's naturally a variance between what different providers offer, as some might bring a richer feature set or allow more customization — sometimes at a premium. The cloud isn't ready for all businesses yet though; on-premises email is a reality for many organizations whose business and technical factors combine to steer a company toward retaining its email and collaboration infrastructure on-premises. Key requirements that favor one approach or the other include:

- **Mailbox size.** Mailbox sizes have been steadily increasing over the years, with 36% falling between 500 MB and 999 MB but still not at the rate employees would like — nearly 80% of companies regularly receive complaints that their employees' mailbox sizes are too small. Cloud-based providers typically offer much larger storage quotas at a much more attractive price than organizations can do for themselves.

- **High availability and disaster recovery.** Midsize companies also might not have the resources at their disposal that larger companies do — and the 99.9% service level that many cloud-based solutions offer surpasses what they can budget for and build out on their own. In addition, the cost of either colocating failover servers or building out a remote data center is too cost-prohibitive, and cloud providers can often bake this into the cost of their solution. Conversely, some larger organizations with the more stringent email availability requirements, larger budgets, and readily available facilities can choose to further invest in more redundant infrastructure to help guarantee SLAs.

- **Integration options for business applications.** Some legacy applications might also use latency-sensitive protocols or require some form of direct access to the email servers themselves. On-premises email typically will offer greater flexibility for you to maintain integration for these applications.

Using the examples from the previous section, the midmarket manufacturing firm is a likely candidate for a cloud-based option, while the enterprise financial services company might be better suited with an on-premises option for now.

Let Holistic Email Requirements Drive Your Deployment Choice

With all of this information, how do you proceed? The first step is to collect and prioritize your email needs. Based on the table of criteria we laid out, you should assess what level of functionality is required for your business, integrating the feedback from IT professionals.

Be Realistic And Holistic About Your Requirements

It's easy to fall into the trap of overstating your actual requirements. Some of your requirements might not be as stringent — separate the "must have" issues from the "nice to have" issues. Overstating requirements can lead a business to skip a viable option or, worse, invest funds that could be used elsewhere. Some of the most common ones include:

- **High availability.** Ask any business leader what he feels is an acceptable amount of email downtime, and he will most likely respond with, "None!" But if you share with him the additional investment required to further ensure that high bar of email availability, he'll likely revise that answer. Certain industries like financial services, where downtime translates very clearly into lost profits, are typically more likely to prioritize uptime. In addition, uptime can't be measured by the availability of the email server alone. Email is as good as down if the antivirus filtering hangs and prevents delivery or a mobile email service fails and employees don't get emails on their smartphones.

- **Archiving.** Providing archiving and eDiscovery facilities often incurs added cost in providing email for each employee. Not all employees carry the same archiving requirements, but some companies tend to think of archiving as an all-or-nothing decision for their workforce. Cloud-based services often offer the ability to segment which employee's email is archived — and you'll reap the benefit on a monthly basis by avoiding paying a fee for those that don't.

- **Email client options.** Like archiving, not all employees need to have an installed email client. Web clients for email access have evolved significantly and incorporate much more than basic features. Provisioning a web-only client can provide a more cost-effective option for those that don't require offline access or the complete installed email client experience.

After settling on priorities, compare your requirements against your options, which may include on-premises and multiple different providers. The right answer also could be both — hybrid on-premises and cloud-based solutions. While certain groups of employees may be better served by an on-premises solution, a hosted option may offer significant opportunities to drive down cost for segments of your workforce in large enterprises. It's a model that has seen success in education settings and is emerging in the corporate world as well.

Appendix A: Methodology

In this study, Forrester conducted an online survey of 400 North American business and IT decision-makers responsible for choosing their companies' email platforms. Fifty-one percent of respondents worked at midmarket companies (100 to 750 employees) and 49% worked at enterprise companies (more than 750 employees). Fifty-one percent of respondents identified as IT decision-makers, while the other 49% identified as business decision-makers. Respondents in our survey had to be planning to or in the process of migrating to a new email platform. Questions provided to the participants asked about email requirements, feature preference, and future plans. This study was completed in February 2011.