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WORKING@HOME

Outsourcing e-mail server upkeep a breeze

By CHERYL CURRID
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A friend of mine loves to use this catchphrase: When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping.

Little does she know that I used it to solve a common business problem.

Here's the dilemma. Small-business owners want to look and act professional. They want to use the same kind of technology big businesses use. The problem -- getting the time, brainpower and staff to support it.

Ah, but there is a way to get big company systems without being a big company. Rent the software and the expertise. Suppliers called application service providers has emerged to do just that. Included are hardware, software and the technical expertise to keep servers and software running, out of sight and out of mind.

I just hired such a provider. After years of running an e-mail server, I threw in the towel. With everything from the patch and virus du jour to nonstop spam, the maintenance was turning into a full-time job.

So I started shopping. I found a group that I could turn over the keys to our Microsoft Exchange Server e-mail system to. It specializes in the care and feeding of servers. Hence, it can deal with that while my organization goes back to work.

It feels like I'm in utopia. I've got the same great big business e-mail system, scheduling and address book system, but I don't have to worry about maintaining it.

Although the server is now in New Castle, Del., it feels just as if it were down the hall.

No worries about disk space, backups, server configuration, the latest virus or planning for an upgrade. And, because the service is using a newer version of software than I had, it gives us more features and great access from anywhere on the Web.

Coincidentally, this utopian feeling comes from a company called Utopia Systems, www.utopiasystems.net, which runs my e-mail, along with other companies', on its big (and well cared for) server and charges a monthly fee. It promises 99.9 percent up time, and so far its server hasn't hiccupped. It's there 24/7 without anyone from my organization having to do anything except use the system.

The service fees start for as little as \$4.99 a month per person. There are a few optional fees for extra disk space, public folders and spam handling. Even so, the fees are modest. In fact, this service is a downright bargain, even for companies of 200 to 300 people; I did the math.

According to the service level agreement, if the system is not available 99.5 percent of the time, the firm reduces its fees. No excuses.

Lesson learned: When something doesn't work, don't suffer. Shop for a new solution.

Cheryl Currid is president of Currid & Co., a Houston technology research and analysis firm. For more information, visit www.currid.com/labs. E-mail comments to labs@currid.com.

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