10 Things All Firms Should Know About Office 365

It's probably safe to assume all readers have heard of Office 365. It is the "fastest-growing corporate product ever" according to Microsoft, and shows no sign of slowing up.

Yet it is still viewed with trepidation by a number of firms, with good reason. So here is a non-technical look at what you should know about Office 365 – the good, and the bad.

1. MORE THAN JUST EMAIL OR WORD IN THE CLOUD

Touted as a full productivity software suite, some key features include:

- Email – instead of an email server in your office, it is hosted by Microsoft
- Office – all the applications you know including Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook and more
- Online Office – access to above apps via web browser
- Storage – instead of saving to a PC or local drive, staff can save documents to SharePoint or OneDrive in the Cloud.
- Collaboration tools - including Skype for Business, online conferencing and Yammer.

2. COLLABORATION

For many, increased collaboration is the most exciting part. Not only can employees share 'presence' information (such as whether they're in a meeting), they can edit documents simultaneously (and see each other's changes as they happen), send instant messages, conduct web meetings, and use private social-network tool, Yammer, for group discussions.

3. MOBILITY – 1 LICENSE, 5 DEVICES

Mobility is no new concept. In a recent survey conducted by Huon IT, 61% of respondents listed mobility as a high priority. Office 365 helps achieve this by letting you install one license on up to five devices.

4. DATA SOVEREIGNTY

A major handbrake to the adoption of Office 365 has been the requirement to keep all your data on Australian soil. Previous hosting out of Singapore meant it didn't meet a lot of firms' compliance obligations, however earlier this year Microsoft opened datacentres in Sydney and Melbourne.

5. INTERNET LIMITATIONS

Another major consideration is internet availability. Firms with limited access can often use the basics such as email services, however if you use Citrix or want other features such as OneDrive and Skype, you may encounter performance hiccups. So if internet in your area isn't up to par, you may choose to only use certain parts of the Office 365 à la carte menu and keep the rest on premise.

6. SMARTER DECISION MAKING WITH BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE

The Enterprise version of Office 365 includes a tool called 'Power BI' which lets you gather data from multiple systems and even public sources, and analyse it to create meaningful reporting and live dashboards. I've seen clients' reporting preparation reduce from days to mere minutes.

7. SECURITY

By using Office 365 you are relinquishing the control of having your data on your hardware in your server room, which is an uncomfortable thought for many. But how secure is your system anyway? Does it rival Microsoft's strict datacenter security, privacy protocols and compliance certifications? This is a personal decision each firm needs to make on their own. Check out Microsoft's 'Trust Centre' to read more.

8. ALWAYS UP TO DATE, BUT BEWARE…

Another highly publicised benefit of Office 365 is that you're always up to date. Anytime a new version comes out, you're eligible to upgrade. However this comes with a risk – if your service is integrated with third party applications which aren't compatible with the newer version, you can only stay on the old version for so long without facing support restrictions. So if you have apps which won't quite keep up with Microsoft, be selective about which parts of your system you move into Office 365 versus the traditional model.

9. OPEX SUBSCRIPTION MODEL

All Office 365 plans are on a monthly or annual subscription. This avoids costly upfront capital expenditures, however you still need to crunch the numbers – if your hardware isn't due for replacement and you don't need to upgrade to always have the latest versions, it might work out cheaper to buy a license outright and keep it on premise for the time being.

10. ENTERPRISE TOOLS

Is Office 365 sophisticated enough for the bigger end of town? There are enterprise versions available which include advanced compliance features such as legal hold, better management of applications including group policy, document and email access controls. It also offers more robust services including SharePoint, Power BI and hosted voicemail. So it's certainly promising, but firms should run a proof-of-concept to ensure it ticks all the boxes.

I'll give it to Microsoft... they've done well with this product. While it is certainly not right for everyone, Office 365 has hit the nail on the head with a broad portfolio catering for the majority of businesses.

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