

Tech Tip Podcast Episode #31– **The Best Email Service For Your Business**

Bumper music

Welcome back to the Shoestring Networks' Tech Tip podcast. My name is David Scott and this is the podcast dedicated to helping small business owners and their IT managers build safe, secure, reliable networks, so that their businesses – and lives - can run smoothly.

Wow, have we been busy! The last couple of weeks around the holidays have been especially crazy. The holidays are always a great time for big projects since a lot of times our customers have extended down-time around weekends. One of the projects we worked on at Thanksgiving (we're in the U.S., so that would be toward the end of November for our international listeners) prompted me to go ahead and get off my butt and get this podcast out.

If you're a small business owner, one of the questions you have to answer is, 'How do I get an email address?' Most of you are way past that question, but what I find a lot of times is that years after making the initial decision, you're still dealing with the ramifications of how you answered that question. See if a few of these resonate with you:

- You opted to use your personal email address from Yahoo! or AOL as your business address. Now you see how unprofessional that looks, but all your customers are using that address, and it might be too hard to switch to a company email account.
- You let your ISP host your email on their SMTP/POP email server. It worked great years ago, but now it's impossible to keep your desktop email client and your iPhone in sync.
- You wanted to have control over all things email, so you had your IT guy set up an Exchange server in your server closet. You don't know how the thing runs, but it does. If it ever goes down, you're hosed!
- You decided that you didn't want the headache of running your own server, so you bought a "Google Apps" account and let Google host your email.

There are more options out there, but believe it or not, I have customers in all four of these categories, and most are unhappy with the decision they made. But it's a huge undertaking to swap to a different paradigm, so they're unhappily living with the consequences.

I'm going to make *one* recommendation that will cover all four of these scenarios, but before I do, I want to address the first option, using your personal email address for company business.

Don't. Just don't. It *is* unprofessional, and your customers and vendors are laughing behind your back. But besides the embarrassment of it, leaving your business in the hands of a service like Yahoo! Mail or Hotmail puts you in a position of instability that could come back to bite you. These services and their terms of service change so often that you have no guarantee that your email will keep going from one day to another. And if something goes wrong, you have no recourse, really. Have you ever tried to get customer support from one of these personal email services? It's atrocious. So you personal email account users should be taking serious notes today.

For those of you still on an ISP's POP3 or even IMAP server, you're next on my list. Most likely you're unsatisfied with your provider's mobile offerings. There's just not a great way to keep your Android or iPhone and desktop email and contacts and calendars all in sync. I have some crazy setups out there where we map email and calendars and gmail calendars or iCloud and - it's just too complicated. And it seems like just when I get a device set up the way my customer wants it, they lose the phone and I have to start all over. Yes, you can get email, and yes, it is "bob@mycompany.com", which looks great on letterhead and your signature line, but it's not a satisfying experience.

Where that lands us is with our last two options: self-hosted Exchange or use a third-party service like Google Apps (now called "G Suite") or perhaps Office 365.

Last weekend my partner Mark and I did our third Exchange upgrade for a long-time customer. We installed IMail as their first email server way back in the day, and since then we've moved to Exchange 2000, 2010 and now Exchange 2016. It's a long process, and frankly, it's a profitable service for us to offer. But believe it or not, we tried to sell them on Office 365 or G Suite, rather than upgrade Exchange again. Let me give you some pros and cons of each option, so that hopefully you can make the decision that best fits your operation.

Let's start with the pros of an Exchange install. If you want fine-grained control of all facets of your business, then hosting your own email makes sense. You control how the mail flows in and out of your business, how it's stored, what your backups look like. You can block or allow any source, so you have a pretty good handle on what spam or attachments can come into your email users. You can block entire countries from sending you email if you want! If something goes wrong, you or your IT guys can fix it, you don't have to wait on anyone. And the features of Exchange are pretty spectacular. It has great mobile and desktop features. Calendars, contacts, and mail all sync across virtually every platform. It has a great web mail client that, honestly, looks just like Outlook. It's incredible. And, as you would expect, Microsoft Office products like Word,

Excel, Powerpoint and Outlook all have hooks into Exchange that allow you to be more productive.

But some of the pros of hosting your own Exchange server can also be cons. Because you have ultimate control over your email server, you're responsible for *everything*. If something goes wrong with the hardware - let's say a hard disk goes out, or maybe you run out of memory - then *you* have to fix it. If your server goes down and you have to restore from backup, it's a huge undertaking; you better hope you were running your backups correctly. And I can tell you from experience, even if you've done everything right, a restore of a crashed Exchange server is a massive undertaking. I've seen it take a week to restore a large mail database. And of course, all your company email is down during the restore process. And let's talk about spam: you can dedicate an employee to spam management. I'm not kidding. Even with third-party anti-spam add-ons, it's crazy how complicated spam can get. Finally the cost of an Exchange install for a small business is very expensive. Exchange gobbles hardware for breakfast. You need a huge piece of server hardware to keep it running smoothly. But then the Exchange Server software isn't cheap, and you have to buy licenses for all your users.

The alternative is a third-party service like Google's G Suite or Office 365. I can tell you that our business runs on G Suite. We have for years, and I've migrated organizations with 3 users and organizations with 3,000 users to G Suite from other email platforms (including Exchange). We used to run our own email servers, but G Suite made it easy for us to switch. Office 365 came out long after G Suite, so I haven't had much experience with it. We haven't moved anyone over to Office 365, but I know it's a matter of time. Most of what I say about third-party services will apply to both. If there's a difference I know of, I'll tell you.

First, the pros. If you're a business with 10 users or less, there is rarely, if ever, a reason you should host your own email. It's too complicated and too expensive. Outsource it to Google or Microsoft and spend your IT money on something that will generate revenue. The only time I might make an exception to this rule is if you're in an industry that has some kind of federal regulation that makes it difficult or illegal to farm your email out, like perhaps a financial services company or medical office. Even then, however, both G Suite and Office 365 offer business associate agreements and privacy controls to help you keep compliant. And often I would argue that G Suite and Microsoft do a better job of managing your compliance than you would do yourself. When it comes to reliability and stability, Google and Microsoft have you beat. They have thousands of servers, all over the world, replicating your data, backing it up, providing redundancy and availability in way that you just can't. I don't want to give you an inferiority complex, but your little company just doesn't have the resources or know how. Both services offer 99% uptime guaranteed service level agreements. When it comes to features, both offer integrated email, calendar and contacts sync, along with Google Drive and Google Docs for G Suite or OneDrive access for Office 365. And both have full mobile support and fantastic web clients for accessing your email or files anywhere.

Finally, and believe it or not, this is a big one for me, they do a fantastic job blocking spam and filtering out malicious files. I haven't seen a service that can match what Google does. And although I don't personally use Office 365, I've attended technical seminars where they detail the process they use for filtering email and it's thorough.

But both have cons. I'll be upfront about one that's pretty big. It's not their fault; usually it's a problem with your internet service provider. But if you are without Internet access for some reason, then you're out of luck when it comes to email. This is really a problem with all cloud services. You have to have a connection to "the cloud" or else you don't have a service. That's why, more and more, I have small business customers installing redundant internet lines in their facilities. Second, you do lose some of the control you might want to have over your email. Google might filter out a piece of mail that you wanted to receive. And you may never know it didn't arrive. Sure, some spam ends up in your "Spam" folder, but sometimes Google or Microsoft will simply reject an email. Or perhaps you want to always allow (or always reject) email from a certain person. There's not a great way to do that as a G Suite administrator. Finally, another problem I've experienced is support. If I'm managing my own email server and have an issue, I can jump on it and get it solved. With a service like G Suite or Office 365 you have to file a ticket, go through a process, and wait for a tech to get back with you. I've never had an issue that couldn't get resolved, but it certainly took longer than I wanted it to take. Maybe I'm just impatient. I tried to sell one of our other customers on G Suite a couple of years ago. He said, "why would I want to rely on someone I don't know and can't pick up the phone and call, when I can just call you?" He vetoed the move because he wanted to know he had support precisely when he needed it. That may be you.

Let's talk cost, briefly. The last Exchange upgrade we did, for an organization with about 200 mailboxes, was around \$50,000, hardware and services included. This does NOT include the cost of Microsoft Server 2012, Exchange Server 2016 and the client access licensing. Then, of course, there's ongoing support by both the in-house IT staff and the folks here at Shoestring Networks. And I can guarantee you that within 5 years we'll have to do it again.

The last time I checked, which was a couple of months ago, G Suite licenses were priced at \$10 per user per month for unlimited everything, or \$5 per user per month for 30GB of storage. Microsoft's basic service is \$8/month Their Cadillac package with HIPAA compliant hosting and Office applications was \$20/user/month. Note the difference here: Both services come with an online office suite in their basic form. But the \$20 Microsoft cost includes desktop versions of Word, Excel, Powerpoint and Outlook. I know some people don't like the idea of an ongoing monthly bill. But you can annualize the costs and match them up to what your hardware and software costs would be for an in-house install.

This has been one of our longer podcasts, but I hope this has given you some insight into the best email options for your business. This weeks' tech tip? I can say from personal experience that a small business should almost always use a service like G Suite or Office 365. It makes practical and financial sense.

If you aren't already on G Suite or Office 365, why not? If you're firmly committed to an in-house server like Exchange, why? Leave your answers in the comments for this episode on the web site.

Thanks for listening this week. If you have any questions or comments, send them to me at podcast@shoestringnetworks.com, or by twitter [@shoestringdave](https://twitter.com/shoestringdave). Or you can leave them in the show notes of today's episode.

As always, thanks for listening in this week. If you've found this helpful, I hope you'll hop over to iTunes and give us a rating. It really helps us reach more people.

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As always - thank you for listening and until next week have a safe and productive work week!