How to choose the right mail server for you...

Overview

In most cases, product selection of a mail server will be heavily influenced by a technical and functional assessment of the software.

The following considerations are relevant as part of the mail server product selection process:

- Product functionality
- Capacity planning/scalability
- Product Architecture/Integration Extensibility
- Platform Requirements
- Peripheral Tools (Stats, Spam, Antivirus, etc)
- Migration Simplicity
- Ease of Installation
- Support
- Updates/upgrades
- Security/hotfixes
- Company (direction, growth)
- User base (Number and type of users)

Product functionality

Over time, mail server products and what they are expected to provide, has changed. Nowadays, mail servers provide more functionality than simply sending and providing access to messages.

Most mail servers provide the same or similar core features (For example, POP, SMTP, IMAP, Web Mail). The decision becomes more complicated if specific functional requirements are considered. Although most mail servers will support basic mail access protocols, there are subtle differences in functionality provided by different products. In such a situation, drawing up a requirements matrix of your functional requirements may be useful in determining the most suitable product for you.

Any vendor-published functionality comparison is likely to be subjective to that mail server (even more so if the feature matrix is compares functionality with other mail server offerings). As such, you may choose to go through a process of aggregating the published lists of all short listed mail server products and comparing the functionality. This can be a time-consuming process, but to facilitate this comparison, MailEnable publishes a comprehensive feature matrix on the web site. For reasons of subjectivity, MailEnable does not attempt to provide any assessment of the functionality provided by other mail server vendors.

The feature matrix is available at http://www.mailenable.com/features.asp

It is possible to obtain un-biased opinions through public forums (where customers can publish their experience/opinions). The issue here is that the qualifications or credibility of the poster is not always known.

Unsolicited testimonials from MailEnable customers are often volunteered on the MailEnable Discussion Forum. This is available at: http://forum.mailenable.com or see user comments on MailEnable at Download.com at http://www.download.com/MailEnable-Standard/3640-2165_4-10309594.html

Capacity Planning/Scalability

In selecting a mail server for a larger size implementation, scalability may be a factor in decision-making.

For those only requiring a couple of hundred users, the scalability of the mail server may not be as critical as those seeking to support thousands of users.

Any decent mail server will reliably support hundreds of mailboxes, but some servers may not be able to scale out to sustain significantly more users. Generally speaking, any reasonably current and appropriately configured server running MailEnable will sustain thousands of mailboxes (even with some reasonably high concurrent usage by these mailbox owners).

The most common questions to be asked in terms of capacity planning are "how many users will the product support on my hardware?" or "what hardware is required to support a certain number of users?"

Unfortunately, it is not a question of saying "hardware configuration X will support Y number of users with services A,B,C,D,…". Consideration of the number of services required, the level of concurrent service usage, the performance of the IO subsystem, the level of logging required, etc all play roles in sizing the requirements of the messaging platform.

Therefore, it may be better to consider any published hardware specifications of a known production system and the number of users supported. For example, many users on the MailEnable forum have outlined their hardware configuration and the number of users sustained.

It is also important to select the right product for the size of your implementation. In the case of MailEnable, the Enterprise Edition product is designed to handle large-scale implementation (over 5000 mailboxes) Enterprise Edition can be used in conjunction with MySQL or SQL Server for managing configuration data. This removes the contention in updating the underlying .TAB files associated with Professional and Standard Editions.

For information on specific configurations with MailEnable, please see the Scalability White Paper at http://www.mailenable.com/support/MailEnable_Scalability_White_Paper.pdf

MailEnable provides the Capacity Planning whitepaper to outline how to add more hardware to facilitate more users.

This is available at: http://www.mailenable.com/support/MEEICG.pdf

Product Architecture/Integration Extensibility

It may be required for the mail server integrate with other software, or at least provide a means to facilitate such integration (e.g. through an API).

Assessing the architecture of a mail server largely requires a review of the inner workings of the mail server itself. As mentioned earlier, most mail servers will provide core functionality and are in most cases comparable in terms of speed. The efficiency and elegance of the "way" the functionality is provided is something that can be particularly relevant should integration be required. The architecture is also integral in determining how effectively the mail server will scale to support multiple users.

For example, MailEnable uses an internal queuing mechanism to route messages between connectors. This model facilitates others to develop their own connectors or agents that are called during the routing process.

MailEnable has an extensive developer Application Programming Interface (API). The API and an extensive array of code samples can be downloaded from the Developer Tools Page at: http://www.mailenable.com/developerresources.asp

Platform Requirements

Most enterprise level mail server solutions require extra hardware and often need very powerful, expensive servers. Not to mention RAM, the latest hard drive technology and a raft of other subsystems. MailEnable is a lean and robust program that has comparatively modest system requirements.

The minimum hardware and software requirements for MailEnable are listed online at: http://www.mailenable.com/requirements.asp

Peripheral Tools/Integration (Statistics, Spam, Antivirus, etc)

In some cases, there may be an overriding tool or product that drives the mail server product selection process. For example, a customer may already own a control panel application (e.g. Ensim, Plesk, Hosting Controller, etc) and it may be imperative that this software interface with the mail server software.

In other circumstances, the ability of the mail server to either provide its own statistics/billing or provide necessary output to such a system may also be particularly relevant in choosing the product.

A corporate license for a particular antivirus software product may be held and it may be necessary to ensure that the mail server can integrate with that particular software product.

The suggested approach here is to take advantage of the product evaluation periods and test any such interoperability between products.

MailEnable provides generous evaluation periods of 90 days. Fully functional evaluation copies can be downloaded from http://www.mailenable.com/download.asp

For details of control panel software products that integrate with MailEnable, please see: http://www.mailenable.com/partners_controlpanels.asp

For a list of antivirus products that integrate with MailEnable, please see: http://www.mailenable.com/features/antivirus.asp

Migration Simplicity

Migrating from one mail system to another mail system can be a costly exercise. Depending on the size of the installation, it can take at least one day to plan and migrate a server from one system to another. In some cases, the labor cost associated with the migration amounts to more than the product/licensing cost.

The openness of the configuration data and message store, as well as the availability of migration tools is important when selecting a mail server. It is wise to explore how to migrate messages and

configuration data to a new platform should this be required. Some products are a closed door in this respect and whilst they are easy to import/migrate to, they are very difficult to migrate from.

When migrating to a mail server it is important to consider the format of the mail server message store (usually MBOX or MDIR format). Avoid proprietary message stores unless they have conversion or access interfaces to allow you to migrate messages from the store.

In terms of configuration information (mailbox names, list names, email addresses, user passwords, etc), it is also important that you can reasonably export such configuration data. MailEnable allows you to export this information in .csv (comma separated values) format, or import Windows users and automate the process of creating mailboxes, passwords, quotas etc.

MailEnable has some generic migration tools available on-line at
http://www.mailenable.com/addons_Conversion.asp

Ease of Installation

The mail server should be easy to set up and administer.   The default installation settings should be configured in such a way that it can be ready for use as a mail server for those mail administrators who are less experienced in mail server configuration.

MailEnable has an inbuilt installation wizard that guides you logically through the process of setting up your mail server. The administration program is familiar and easy to use, leveraging the Microsoft Management Console environment – the interface is simple and intuitive.

MailEnable has installation kits available for download with 90 day evaluation periods. These can be downloaded from http://www.mailenable.com/download.asp

Support

Product support is a critical factor in determining the purchase of the mail server and needs to be considered when determining the Total Cost of Ownership. Support may be provided on a contractual basis or on a per incident basis.

Response times and cost are significant factors in determining suitability of a particular software vendor. Some vendors may provide a low cost solution, but support is charged at a premium.

MailEnable provides premium support to all registered users at a reasonable cost. Every support call is tracked, documented and responded to. Most issues can be resolved within one business day. New users are provided with two complimentary support tokens upon purchasing – these tokens are valid for three months.

MailEnable's Support policy is online at http://www.mailenable.com/policies/support.asp

In addition to email and telephone support, MailEnable provides comprehensive documentation on every product, a searchable knowledge base, online help and user forum. The MailEnable product range includes extensive logging and diagnostic reporting to expedite the support process.

Updates/Upgrades

Regular updates/upgrades should be provided to ensure that the latest features are made available to users.

MailEnable's policy with respect to upgrades/updates provides users with free software minor version updates (product versions are recorded as X.Y) where Y indicates the minor version number and X indicates the major version number. There is also a free software upgrade to the new major version if you have purchased MailEnable in the previous 6 months prior to release of the new version.

Registered users who wish to upgrade Editions will be offered a discount that will be determined at the time of release.

Updates and upgrades should be easy to implement and not require any reconfiguration. Upgrading or updating any version of MailEnable is a straightforward process and gives you the option to retain all of the current configuration and settings as part of the installation process.

For more information on licensing and upgrading, please see: http://www.mailenable.com/licensing/

Security/Hotfixes

Security is an important issue with respect to mail servers. The mail server should be protected against abuse by spammers or other unauthorized persons.

MailEnable has implemented various security measures including relay control and various methods of authentication in all mail server products to protect the server against unauthorized access.

In the event that a security issue is identified with the mail server, the vendor needs to be appropriately responsive and provide a resolution for that issue in a timely manner.

MailEnable has been able to respond to reported security issues, producing hotfixes in less than one day for identified security issues.

Company

MailEnable is a software company that specializes solely in the development of high performance mail server systems for the Windows platform.

The company was incorporated in 2002 when the Standard Edition product was ready to market. The charter for MailEnable was to generate a product that was inexpensive, designed to be logical and easy to administer, with no per domain or mailbox licensing.

Since then, the company has expanded, but the core focus is still to produce the best solution for the mail hosting market on the Microsoft Windows platform. As well as concentrating on product development, the company has also invested a significant amount of time in enhancing support services to properly address client needs.

MailEnable's commitment to excellence is painting a bright for future for both company and customers.

User base/growth

MailEnable has boasted significant annual revenue growth since its incorporation in 2001. Thousands of copies of MailEnable are downloaded daily from the MailEnable web site. As Standard Edition is provided for free, and does not require registration, there is no way to ascertain how many people are using the product on their mail server.

MailEnable is used by several large hosting providers. There are a number of hosting partners (ISP's that offer MailEnable on their platform) and resellers in over 30 countries around the world.

The number of registered customers using Professional Edition and Enterprise Edition product is growing steadily as MailEnable moves into new market segments, including schools, and corporates.

For information on MailEnable in a hosting environment please see:
http://www.mailenable.com/hosting.asp

For information on MailEnable in an educational environment please see:
http://www.mailenable.com/education.asp

For information on MailEnable in a corporate environment, please see:
http://www.mailenable.com/corporate.asp