

GOVERNMENT TECHNOLOGYSM

SOLUTIONS FOR STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN THE INFORMATION AGE

Contracting E-Mail



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In 2005, Stratford, Conn., faced an overtaxed e-mail server. The first solution that came to mind was an upgrade from Microsoft Exchange Server 5.5 to Microsoft Exchange 2003. But the implementation, consulting and purchasing costs involved would've weighed heavily on the small town's budget.

David Wright, Stratford's IT manager, found a solution that he said was more feasible and economically sound - adopting a software-as-a-service (SaaS) approach for e-mail and groupware applications with intranet capabilities.

E-Mail as a Service

Wright evaluated several options before selecting InfoStreet's StreetSmart, a Web-based IT software service consisting of an integrated suite of business applications that users access through an intranet. For Wright, the ideal combination of an affordable e-mail solution and intranet capability was exactly what he was looking for.

"We really wanted to have an intranet, and our town manager at that time was looking for us to have an intranet to post information and make it accessible to employees who weren't based in fixed locations," Wright said. "He wanted to try to make information more widely available to town employees who didn't necessarily sit at the desk all day."

Before adopting the SaaS solution, there was no easy way for Stratford employees to access e-mail and other work files from home. But now local government workers, including off-site personnel, can access e-mail and collaborate with their colleagues through shared calendars, automated meeting invitations and electronic task lists - all through one Web browser.

The SaaS suite includes e-mail, calendar, address book, workflow management, file sharing, Outlook synchronization and Web publishing capabilities.

Using a software-oriented server with intranet was also appealing for Stratford because of the ability to maintain communications during disaster conditions.

"We knew that having an Exchange server in town, especially in our town hall, which was where it was located, could be a real problem for us in communication with our town employees in a time of crisis," Wright said. "If our e-mail capability was located in town and we are trying to get people where they could get e-mail, there was going to be a problem."

Quick Conversion

During implementation of the new software suite in July 2005, Stratford's aging Exchange server crashed.

So instead of gradually shifting each department to the SaaS platform, Wright decided to convert the entire e-mail infrastructure as quickly as possible. Wright and his IT department were able to perform a full conversion in 36 hours. Once Stratford's e-mail was up and running, the old Exchange server was rebuilt to retrieve historical e-mail messages, as well as employee contact and calendar information.

The savings were substantial - with a \$12,000 annual price tag for Stratford's 500 e-mail users, compared to an estimated \$150,000 one-time fee for a full Exchange upgrade and implementation. And the SaaS solution worked well for Stratford because of the town's small size - about 50,000 people - and could possibly work well for other towns of similar size, Wright said.

"I think it's a simple solution," Wright said, "and it certainly would be easy for a very small IT department or town with very limited IT resources because it doesn't take anything to administer."

The StreetSmart suite is in its seventh edition, but because of the success Stratford had with the software, the company said it will tailor its product to municipal governments and other organizations that operate from multiple locations.

"Municipalities in particular have people in various buildings, and they want to have everybody under the same workflow system using the same e-mail system, having the same portal system and sharing the same library and file sharing," said Siamak Farah, founder and CEO of InfoStreet.

Since many local governments must heed open record laws, including e-mail message retention, the company recently added an e-mail archiving service to its SaaS product, which will provide a centralized e-mail repository for users.

Farah said InfoStreet has approximately 100,000 SaaS suite users, and an increasing number of clients, like Stratford, have replaced Microsoft Exchange with SaaS.

Farah said he believes the reason for the switch is the suite's ability to work with existing programs, such as Outlook, combined with the software's affordability.

"They don't have to buy hardware," Farah said, "they don't have to buy a license for an upgrade, spam-protection software or virus-protection software."