Do I Need a Server?

If you're looking to grow your small business, make sure you have the right tools.

Whether they know it or not, many small businesses can benefit greatly from adding a centralized server to their network. First and foremost, adding a server to an existing network will allow for centralized authentication. This means that a central user directory exists on the server that contains the user names and passwords of all the employees in the company. In Windows, this is called an Active Directory domain. All the desktop systems on the network are then joined to the domain, and users log into their desktops normally, but the server controls their access. This means that users can log into any desktop on the network with their user name and password, and have their files and settings appear as if they were sitting at their own computer. This functionality is crucial for security and provides the foundation for many other facets of network computing.

This directory can also be used to allow or deny access to certain files to only those users who should have access. A normal small-business server will have file shares available that contain users' personal files as well as shared files that other users can access when necessary. By dedicating a share to each user, they can store sensitive and private information in a place that only they can access. On the other hand, there are generally public shares that anyone with a valid account can access. This is where files are stored that should be available to every employee. It's also possible to use space on the server to back up laptop systems that might hold important data. Coupling centralized authentication with file sharing greatly enhances security while making files easier to find.

From your users' perspective, the server will be visible on the network with a unique name, and shares will be listed under the server's name. Proper setup and configuration will use a login script on each desktop to automatically connect to network shares served by the server, and your users will quickly get accustomed to finding and saving files to the server rather than their local desktop. In most cases, you can enforce this action through the use of Group Policies, which will allow users to save files to their My Documents folder -- but that folder is actually located on the server. In this way, you can ensure that your users are saving their files to the server.

BRINGING E-MAIL IN-HOUSE

A server can also be used to centralize e-mail. A small business that's currently operating without a server is probably using an external source for e-mail, such as Yahoo or Google. These services are cheap or even free, but adding a server and configuring it to handle e-mail tasks brings all of your e-mail in-house. This will make users' e-mail access faster and keep sensitive information within the company's doors, not stored on servers on the other side of the country. With Microsoft Small Business Server, you can also use Microsoft Outlook for e-mail, calendaring, and scheduling, which can greatly enhance your business productivity.

CENTRALIZED APPLICATIONS

Also, you may need to add applications to your network at some point, such as an inventory or customer resource management application. These can be run from your server and used by your employees while keeping the data

safe on the server's redundant storage. You can also run small databases on your server with tools like FileMaker Pro and Microsoft Access. In most businesses, these applications are the key to the company, and keeping them safe and sound is an absolute requirement, especially as the business grows.

BUILD AN INTRANET AND EXTRANET

Depending on the size of the business, it might be a good idea to build a simple intranet site for your users. This could house quick links to forms, commonly used files, and information for your employees, as well as serve as a central point for distributing information throughout the company.

Microsoft's Small Business Server comes with SharePoint, which can make the process of building and maintaining an intranet site very simple. If your business needs to exchange large files with other companies or clients, you can also use your server to house these files and allow access to outside entities (an extranet), which is a far better idea than simply e-mailing large files. Many e-mail providers and companies restrict the size of inbound e-mail, and direct file transfers may be the only way to distribute some information. By leveraging the tools in Microsoft Small Business Server and creating a reasonable extranet portal, these problems vanish. Historically, files have been shared with tools such as FTP (File Transfer Protocol), but it may be simpler to build a secured extranet site where your clients can retrieve files and other data.

MOBILE E-MAIL

By moving your company's e-mail to a local server, you can use Microsoft ActiveSync and Exchange to enable e-mail access to your mobile devices, such as a BlackBerry or iPhone. If constant e-mail access and notifications can help your business, then this is a simple and effective way to enable that functionality.

BACKING UP YOUR DATA

Once authentication, files, and applications have been centralized, you have a single place to turn for all backups. While RAID arrays can keep a server functioning following a disk failure, the data stored on your server is worth much more than the server itself. In the event of a catastrophic failure, fire, or flood, that data can mean the difference between keeping the doors open or closing them for good. Thus, backing up this server is essential.

Most small businesses will want to add a reasonably-priced tape drive to the server. A tape drive uses magnetic media to store data on individual tapes. Backup software running on the server backs up the server's operating system and files to the tape. Tape is slow, and backing up even a small-business server can take several hours, which is why these backups are generally scheduled to run overnight. Once a backup has been completed, these tapes can be stored off-site in a secure location.

In most cases, the best idea is to create a tape rotation plan that will result in tapes being reused every few weeks, with the most recent backups being brought home or to another location for security.

By implementing centralized authentication and file serving, and adding a reasonable backup plan, employee desktops will no longer be responsible for storing important data. They're simply workstations, meaning that problems affecting a desktop system won't affect anyone else in the company.

There are many benefits to adding a server to a small business network. The rule of thumb is that if you're spending a lot of time moving information around your organization, if you're having trouble wringing real efficiencies out of your current computers, or if you have concerns about data safety, it's time to get your first server.

Yes, it may sound daunting, but you're not alone. Millions of small businesses have taken the step already, and it's certainly worth the effort.