

The email that roared

As small and medium businesses grow, they uncover a misnomer about their computer systems – file sharing does not always actually mean sharing.

Instead, storage capacity can all too easily become clogged up with the same material being stored many times by multiple users. And just as an expanding business can experience great pressure on desk and car parking space, servers can become sluggish and overworked simply because they're not set up to work smartly.

IT teams that are already concerned by server congestion can find it hard to prove that files are stored in accordance

with the IT compliance laws and guidelines now affecting businesses.

Yorkshire Water is a typical example. It supplies 1.24bn litres every day to 1.7m households and 140,000 businesses every day – that's the equivalent of a glass of water for every person on the planet – and it also treats nearly the same amount every day and returns it to the environment. The utility's IT department analysed its systems and discovered that 85 per cent of the 509Gb given over to storing emails was taken up by file attachments, many of which were duplicated several times.

A simple thing can become a big problem, even emails. Yorkshire Water knew that data storage could be an issue. But, as Sean Hargrave discovers, a problem was turned into an opportunity.



"One of our users had 148Mb of attachments in one email that had been sent internally to several people. It was an extreme case, but we knew that we had far too much of our email server space taken up with huge files that were duplicated, so it made sense to be able to have just one copy" – Ian Marshall, senior technical analyst, Yorkshire Water

"People email several people internally with attachments, which are then stored several times," explains Mark Sampson, client manager at Neocol UK. The data management specialists were brought in to sort through the backlog. "It makes sense just to have one version of a file stored on another server or back up system so all the people that need to can access the same file rather than overload the system by each storing a version of it."

As with any new system, the IT team has had to come up with a new set of rules to make sure the company gets the benefit of the new IBM CommonStore system. Multiple copies of attachments still go through, but now users can 'Send and Archive' emails at the same time through their Lotus Notes. Large attachments can be instantly archived, yet still viewed by those that need to see them. Older emails and attachments are automatically archived.

"There are two sides to why people would want to use this technology: to improve performance and to be compliant with a whole raft of new data retention laws and guidelines," says Sampson. "The main benefit is that large files can be backed up on cheaper systems – such as optical disc – and free up space and capacity on email servers." It's a simple solution that allows the system to work quicker and it means back ups take less time. In all, it makes the business more streamlined – and that's fundamental.

Good things, small packages

The latter point was important for Yorkshire Water. There was increased pressure on the email servers available to the IT department. The system could run slower than hoped, while requiring more and more time for vital data to be safeguarded.

"You could just keep buying more email server space, but there's only so many hours in the day for back up and you can end up with too much data to protect," Marshall says. "The other huge benefit for us is that the team here spent an estimated three or four days every month moving users around email servers to use space efficiently and make sure one or two servers weren't stretched. It wasn't only time-consuming for us, it also caused problems because users often didn't follow the instructions on how to accept the changes to their accounts. We had to provide extra support. We don't have to do this any more – it's taken a huge job off our hands."

Although compliance issues were also important, Marshall underlines that the major issue for the company was getting the most out of its email servers with a system that was scalable.

"The main benefit is going to be cost avoidance, particularly when we come to renew our servers and find we don't need as many as we would have had we just carried on as usual," he suggests.

Why is this important? They're just emails after all and while they can cause some logistical problems, they shouldn't have any long-term impact, if they're looked after, right? For Yorkshire Water, it was more than that.

"This system makes sense because we can use the same principle for additional data and not just emails," Marshall points out. "We've recently extended it to digital photographs, with staff in the field taking pictures of repairs that need to be done or have been completed. Now we store them once and anyone who needs to can still get access to them. Before, they could sit on multiple hard-drives wasting lots of space. Our new system's given us extra options."

Keep the gears moving

Sampson believes that more and more companies will begin to take a close look at their data storage, as they start to realise their IT teams are needlessly spending precious resources moving data around a network to free up space so the business does not grind to a halt.

"It doesn't have to just be email, although that's often the type of data that companies look at first because it causes the most congestion on a network," he says. No surprise: according to Sampson, the average employee will generate a gigabyte of email data a year. Multiply that by the number of employees – both now and how many you think you may have in years to come. It's obvious that you can't just keep on buying more and more servers, and still expect back ups to run smoothly.

"Once email's been tackled," Sampson concludes, "companies then tend to move on to additional data to keep their networks running more smoothly."

Keeping a single version of files and eradicating multiple copies would appear a very simple step, but it certainly seems to be paying dividends. Yorkshire Water reports it is not only achieving a faster, more reliable network, on which data can be backed up quickly, but also getting the most out of IT staff and server resources. And that's a big step from a seemingly small beginning.



where next?

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