

Managing our complete company using Microsoft products

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Greetings!

We are a small company with about 30 computer users. Some of us (management, customer support and administration) are heavy computer users, while a few are only touching the computer to scan a barcode and wait until a certain label is printed.

I have already created a sheet that shows who in our company is using the computer for what purpose, and what kind of equipment we own. This gives me a good picture what's going on in our company.

We are a company doing online business, which means that every single computer is connected to the Internet and nearly all of us have to access a web application. We have our main office, a handful of remote workers, and two small branches with not more than 5 computers each.

Apart from the web application (which runs through Internet explorer and is hosted outside the office), most of our users need their computers for IMAP Email, printing, MS Word, and MS Excel. Some of us have PGP, Acrobat Professional, diverse file transfer and CD/DVD burning software, Image Processing, HTML and a couple of specialized Windows packages (Accounting or Programming).

In our main office, we currently have Windows based servers used as Active Directory, Mail Server, File Server and Print Server. There is a total of 25 Windows workstations at the main office currently.

The two branch offices are completely separate and one has their own Active Directory and network, while the other one has 6 peer-to-peer Windows 2000 PCs.

Our complete computer and network infrastructure has been built during the years by ourselves, without real specialists. We are just a couple of heavy computer and Internet users facing the need to add more, clean up, upgrade licenses, increase network capacity, rent a bigger office, buy more PC's, replace old PC's, and so on --- and all this frequently.

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Because we are looking into expanding our company further in 2005 and plan to hire about 10 new people, we will have to add equipment once more. The equipment is not our only worry. The company reached a size where managing documents, sharing tasks, workflows, communication and managing knowledge became difficult to manage.

We do not have a system administrator, and we do not have the resources or knowledge to properly plan and extend our network and “business platform” further without professional help.

Unfortunate, we are also in a position where we cannot outsource due to the confidentiality issues that come with our business, and simply because of our geographical location. We would rather want to invest into our own network engineer or network administrator, who comes with experience and knows what we need, who can give us a hand and train our employees and ourselves where needed, and who makes sure that the daily operation runs smoothly and people have guidelines (backups, anti-virus) to follow and understand them.

We are using IMAP Email as our primary means of internal and external communication, and due to the missing system administrator (and personal preferences of the business owners), we failed to integrate an Exchange server combined with Outlook into our business. Every single employee, including all the managers and supervisors, are manually remembering their tasks, deadlines, schedules and such, and everything is done manually.

We would like to have a solution such as a combination of Exchange and Outlook in place, mainly for calendar and tasks (communication itself works actually pretty well with IMAP/MDaemon). This of course should work with Outlook itself (in and outside the office through Firewall) or using the Exchange web mail client (again, in and outside).

But the main thing we are looking for is some software that helps us to put the complete workflow of our company into a database, helps us to assign tasks, see all the departments, available resources, bottlenecks, and dependencies.

We hope that MS Project, combined with a couple of other MS applications (Exchange, Outlook, Sharepoint, whatever) could be helpful. Provided that we find out what kind of person we need to hire to get all this up and running, get some knowledge how to keep it running, and get training how to use it.

We have been avoiding this step for too many years, not willing to pay a huge amount of money to Microsoft for such expensive applications, not willing to accept the overhead of getting such applications installed and customized, not willing to accept the security holes and risks that apparently come with Microsoft products. We have reached the point where we need a stable platform to work with, we need some help and hope to get it through these Microsoft solutions.

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After reading that entire long story here and by knowing that the persons who wrote this are doing all of their project management and enterprise resource management the old fashioned way (manually), do you have any directions you can give us?

What kind of person are we looking for? By looking at some jobs web site, I believe we are looking for a "System Engineer" and a "System Administrator" (both in one person).

What kind of certificates does this person need? I've heard of something like MCP, MCSE, MCSA, etc. What we need is a person who knows technically how to get our servers and systems up and running, knows how these applications work and what they are used for. Before getting to work, this person needs to analyze not only the current IT infrastructure with us, but also analyze some of our business logic and office/administration procedures to understand our needs and how to implement the new systems best. Getting things up and running and provide user guides and training for everyone is only the tip of the iceberg.

What Microsoft products are we looking at here to manage our company resources (especially workflows, tasks, schedules, dependencies, documents) through our valuable Windows 2003 servers? Is our guess with MS Project a shot into the right direction? Is Exchange is needed under any circumstances? What else is there and we didn't already mention? Visio?

What is your best guess for such an implementation to setup the systems and get things up and running, and to train people and make them using it? The company management is open-minded, technically talented, and everyone has 10+ years computer experience. The core-management comes from the programming field, and all other employees have long-term MS Office and Windows experience.

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Kind regards
Suzanne Woo