

RESEARCH PAPER

Cloud migration myth buster

Why email archives shouldn't be an afterthought

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Introduction

Businesses have become increasingly dependent on email over the last few decades to conduct their business. Although the rise of newer messaging platforms by younger audiences in particular have complemented workplace collaboration, email is proving remarkably resilient. In 2019, the number of global email users amounted to a tidy 3.9 billion, and that number is set to grow to 4.4 billion by 2024.¹ Moreover, an exchange of emails can be as legally binding as an exchange of physical documents. Emails, therefore, contain large amounts of critical business data, and these are usually stored in an archive for the purposes of compliance, as well as storage management.

Microsoft's cloud has continued to grow strongly, fuelled in no small part by the immense popularity of O365. Migration of live email to the cloud – and ongoing archiving – is just one aspect of cloud migration. There is also the migration of legacy email archives to consider. Email migrations, in the sort of hybrid that is now the norm, are likely to be complex operations, with numerous factors having to be assessed prior to any migration – and what to do about legacy archives form a key part of this assessment. In many cases the archive is an after-thought, rather than a key component in an email migration strategy.

Computing surveyed 150 technical professionals from a variety of industries, such as banking and finance, mining, construction, distribution, retail, education and training. Company size varied from fewer than 500 employees to more than 10,000, with the majority employing somewhere between 500 and 2,000 people.

The objectives of the research were to establish how organisations are retaining archived email data and their plans for the future. It gauges the primary drivers for migrating email archives to the cloud and explores some of the concerns and barriers organisations are experiencing around email archive migration, and how they might be overcome.

Key findings:

- 80 percent of respondents have migrated to O365 or are the process of doing so.
- 70 percent were subject to industry specific regulations over and above those applying to every industry such as GDPR.
- Almost two thirds of respondents were using O365 archiving to at least some extent.
- Confidence in the quality and immutability of email archives is generally high.
- Confidence in the searchability of archives is lower. Approximately half of respondents would take more than 24 hours to surface necessary data in the event of an eDiscovery request and only 13 percent felt highly confident that this could be done without the involvement of technical teams.

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/255080/number-of-e-mail-users-worldwide/>

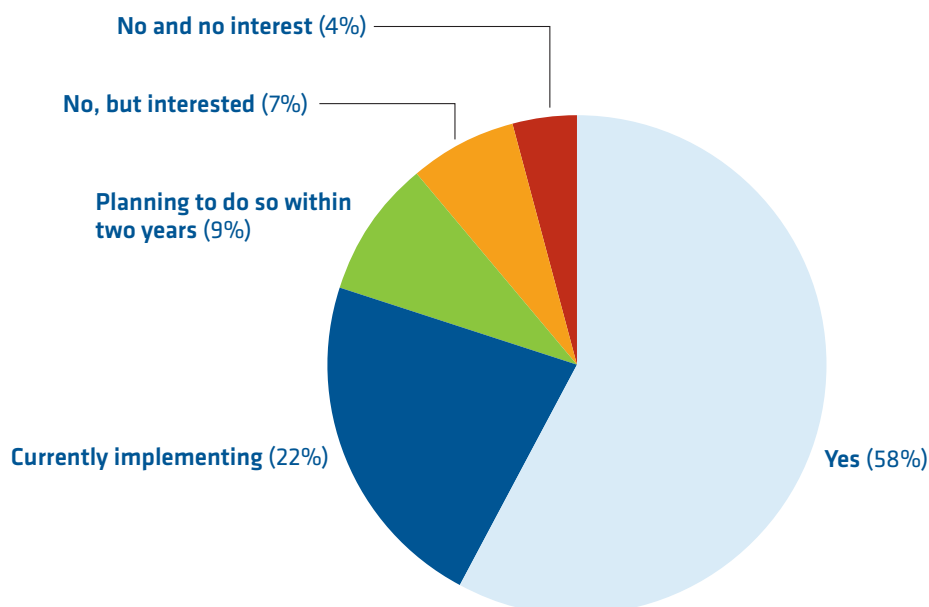
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- Only half of our respondents who had migrated their live email to the cloud had migrated their email archives at the same time.
- The most widely cited reason for delays were other more pressing priorities, delays in the archive review process, concerns about end user access, concern about costs and shortages of skills.
- The benefits of archive migration were significant. Forty-four percent of our respondents were experiencing reduced costs of maintenance and support, and 41 percent reduced capital costs. Forty-one percent told us that end users were more able to locate the items they required.

Current state of emails in the cloud

The popularity of Microsoft's Office 365 is hard to overstate. Microsoft hit the 200 million user mark last Autumn², and whilst it's difficult to envision growth rates continuing so strongly given the numbers of businesses which have already migrated, there is no doubt that O365 and the wider M365 cloud has given Microsoft a huge boost in the battle for overall cloud market shares.

Fig. 1 : Have you migrated your live email to the cloud?



² <https://techcommunity.microsoft.com/t5/office-365/office-365-hits-200-million-monthly-active-users/m-p/942813>

Working patterns had already changed enormously in the last decade, with levels of flexibility and home working increasing in almost every industry. The Covid-19 pandemic is likely to accelerate this trend – not just for the duration of the pandemic but permanently. If people have been able to do their jobs from home for months on end, they are unlikely to troop back to the office on the same scale that existed pre-Covid.

The kind of flexible working that cloud productivity applications enable is likely to remain the norm rather than being for a privileged few. Although habit, tradition and the need for social interaction with colleagues means that offices are unlikely to completely disappear, the days of organisations shelling out for acres of expensive office space seem numbered.

Figure 1 illustrates the huge popularity of the Microsoft platform. Eighty percent of our survey respondents have either already migrated or are in the process of doing so.

Why email archives shouldn't be an afterthought

Our survey respondents varied in their approach to the migration. Half of them migrated their archive to the cloud at the same time as their live boxes. Twenty-one percent migrated the archive later but had now completed that project. Twenty-seven percent still retained a separate on-premises archive and three percent retained their archive with a third-party specialist off-premises.

REASON #1: ARCHIVING MATTERS

All businesses are legally obliged to have email retention policies set in place. Sensitive business information is often contained within email. It could be intellectual property or confidential information pertaining to a customer. If this data is compromised by one of the numerous cyber-attacks that businesses are relentlessly subjected to the implications could be severe, particularly given the requirements on reporting data breaches which GDPR mandates.

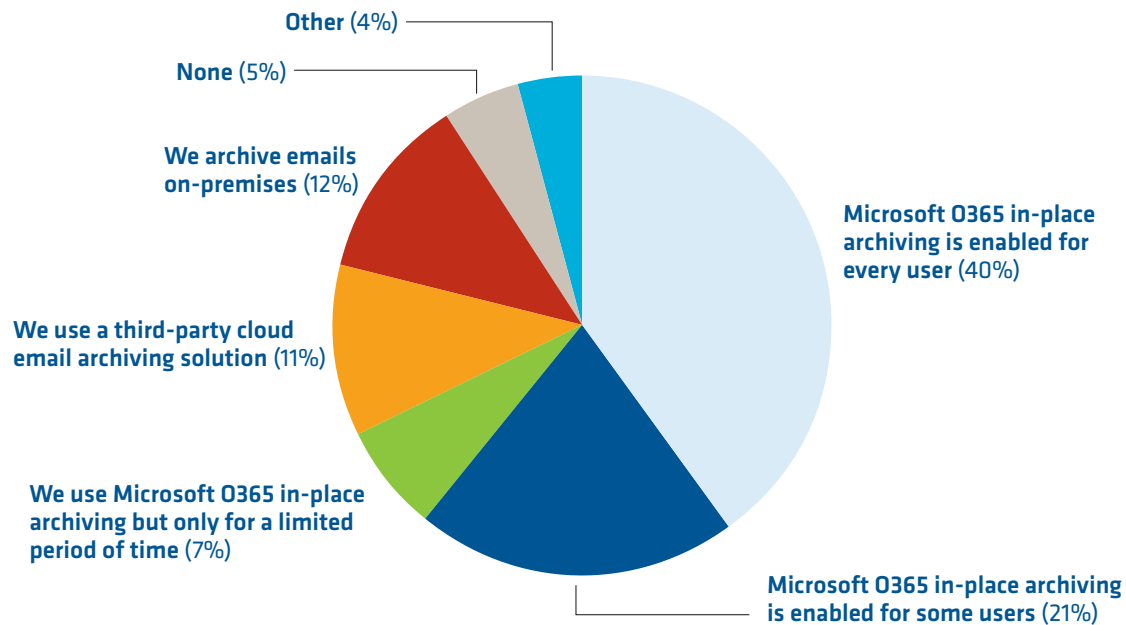
There are further legal aspects to consider. If a company finds itself on the receiving end of litigation, eDiscovery or a Freedom of Information request, that company needs to be able to surface the relevant data quickly and crucially be sure that this data has not been altered or tampered with in any way. Finally, there is the question of industry regulations relating to data control and security. Legislation such as GDPR is one thing, but many industries are also heavily regulated and, in most cases, compliance is monitored by industry watchdogs. Finance, banking, retail, law, utilities and healthcare are examples of such industries.

Out of the 150 organisations represented in our survey, 70 percent stated that they were subject to industry specific regulations over and above those applying to every industry such as GDPR.

REASON #2: O365 ARCHIVING SECURITY

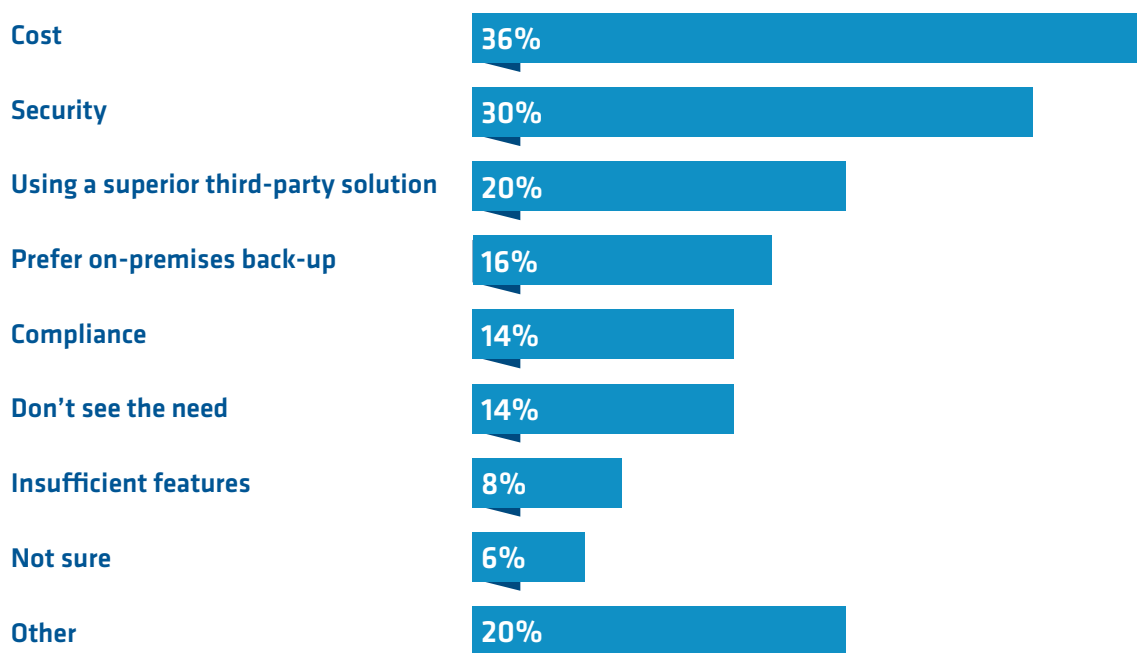
There are a number of routes that organisations can take with their email archiving, post migration. Figure 2 illustrates these options (*see over*). The most popular approach is to use the O365 in-place archiving for every user, with half as many again using it for some users but not all. Only 11 percent used a third-party cloud solution and 12 percent are still choosing to archive on-premises. The four percent stating “other” were all using Google mail.

Fig. 2 : What email archiving solution are you using?



The question of whether the in-place archiving offered as part of the O365 enterprise bundles is sufficient for businesses varies depending on one's perspective, and our respondents varied in their approach, as the diagram below shows.

Fig. 3 : What are your reasons for not using Microsoft O365 email archiving?



The cost of O365 archiving was one the biggest barrier to its use. It is available only as an add on with some plans and bundled into a more extensive array of features with the enterprise plans. The cost per user can escalate quite sharply with enterprise plans and if not all extra functionality is required, it may be that third party archiving solutions provide value for money – indeed cost was a leading motivation for opting for a third-party for 38% of those who did so.

Security was also a huge concern. Whilst Microsoft does provide a level of email security, this is very basic unless you buy in to the highest cost licences – and even then, the level of security may not match that of a dedicated email gateway security solution. Certain types of attack – particularly socially engineered, business email compromises mean that the security of email archives is placed at risk.

This is exacerbated by issues with the immutability of data. Whilst In-place hold and litigation hold are features which place either part of a mailbox or an entire mailbox on hold pending legal investigation and are useful features, there are flexible permissions in O365 which mean that users can access their own archives on a day-to-day basis. That in itself is far from ideal from a security and compliance perspective.

End users remain a significant security consideration for many organisations and of course if end users can access their own archives so potentially can a cyber-attack. Compliance mandates necessitate an immutable, tamper proof archive and O365 does not yet provide that.

REASON #3: eDISCOVERY LIMITATIONS

Computing asked a specific question on this subject. **“Thinking of e-discovery, how confident are you that your archive is immutable and that end-users cannot tamper with emails?”**

Only 25 percent described their stance as “completely confident,” with 56 percent opting for a more considered, “reasonably confident.”

Another issue crossing over into the realm of compliance is that of time taken to recover data from archives. Whilst there is also an auto-expanding archive so storage space shouldn't be a problem, (although there are still some limits,) ³ the issue that many organisations face, is that merely having the data there is not the same as actually being able to surface it – as the diagram on the next page illustrates.

It is important to note at this point that whilst not every respondent is using O365 archiving, more than two-thirds are. Figure 4 tells us that only a fraction more than half of our respondents could surface the relevant data in less than 24 hours. In the case of O365 users, this is partly because O365 imposes limits on search capabilities and also on the file types that can be searched.

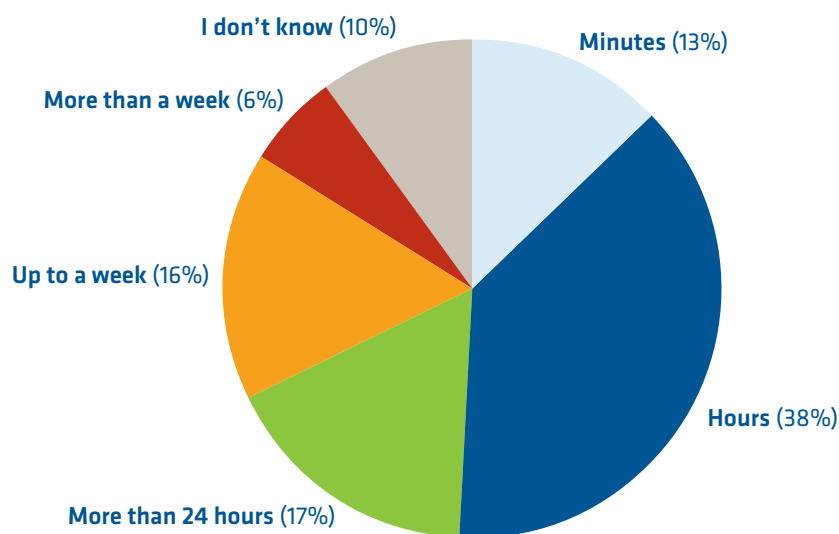
A contributory factor here is also that (at the time of writing) eDiscovery workflow is also only available within in the top end enterprise bundles, and if automated workflows are not in place, it's very difficult for end users to find the relevant information – IT involvement is invariably required, which means big delays in surfacing data in the event of a request. Only 13 percent of our respondents were very confident that legal/finance users they could find the data they needed without IT involvement.

³ <https://office365itpros.com/2019/11/04/microsoft-clamps-down-auto-expanding-archive-mailboxes/>

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O365 archiving may well be sufficient for the needs of many businesses (indeed, almost 42 percent of those we surveyed told us this was the case for them) but equally, some organisations would benefit from purpose-built solutions.

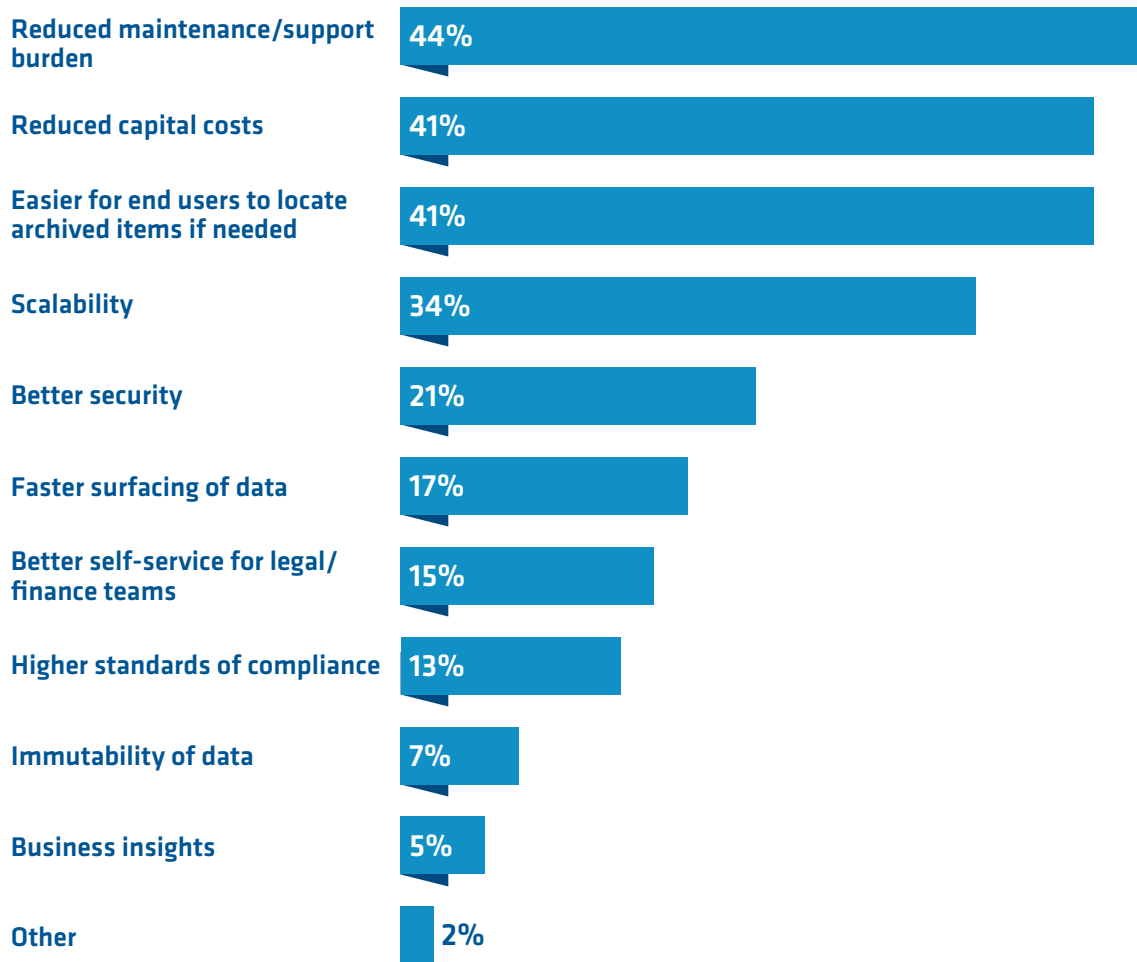
Fig. 4 : In the event of a FOI, SAR or eDiscovery request, how long would it take your organisation to surface the necessary data?



REASON #4: COST-SAVINGS

The parking of archive migration on the “to do” list is probably also related to the time it takes business to review the archive, which is the first step in migrating it. It can be a laborious process – particularly if you’re working with older technologies and multiple formats and platforms, which in archiving is not uncommon.

However, there is a strong case to be made for moving legacy archives at the same time as live mailboxes which Figure 5 so deftly illustrates. The reduction in costs – both capital costs and the costs of maintenance and support was highly significant for our respondents. It was also easier for end users to locate archived items if required which again removes the issues of admins acting as a bottleneck in such processes. The scalability of cloud solutions has also benefited our respondents considerably. There is a further long tail of benefits of not leaving legacy email archives as an afterthought during a cloud migration, even though it may slow down the process initially.

Fig. 5 : What are the biggest benefits you have seen from migrating your archive to the cloud?

SUMMARY

A large majority – 80 percent of respondents to our exclusive survey had either already migrated to O365 or were doing so at the moment.

In-place archiving within O365 is also popular. Sixty-eight percent use it to some degree. Nonetheless, O365 cannot be compared to a dedicated third-party archiving solution which has been designed for one purpose only.

Many of our respondents had concerns about the security of their archives, and the fact that O365 does not provide an immutable, tamper proof archive. There are also issues with surfacing data. O365 imposes limits on search capabilities and also file types, which lead to almost half of our respondents stating that in the event of an eDiscovery request it would take in excess of 24 hours to surface the relevant data.

Furthermore, the lack of automated workflows means that only 13 percent were very confident that data could be found without IT involvement. In summary, O365 is good enough for many businesses, but for some, the value for money equation doesn't always add up.

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In addition to basic legal requirements, 70 percent of the organisations represented in our survey stated that they were subject to industry specific regulations over and above those applying to every industry, which means that the price of losing data in a migration could be high indeed.

Besides, reducing on-premises infrastructure footprint by migrating archives has numerous benefits. Forty-four percent of our respondents were enjoying reduced costs in terms of maintenance and support, and 41 percent reduced capital costs. The benefits to end users were also clear, with 41 percent more able to locate the items they required.

However, only half of our respondents migrated their email archives to the cloud at the same time as their live email. Approximately one fifth delayed the project and almost 30 percent still retained a completely separate archive either on or off-premises.

Hurdles to migrating archives

We asked the survey respondents who chose to delay their archive cloud migrations why they chose this approach. The most widely cited reason was that it simply wasn't accorded high priority. The second most likely reason was that the task of reviewing the archive, deduping etc, still had to be undertaken. There were also concerns about end user access to legacy mails, concern about costs and, as so often seems to be the case, a lack of necessary skills.

The fact that legacy archives tend to be lower priority than live email is mainly due to the scale of the task. Whilst migrating live email is a relatively straightforward exercise, the sheer amount of data involved in a legacy archive can be daunting. There is also the issue of attachments, formats etc. Most IT services organisations are decidedly light on manpower (and the fact that lack of skills was a widely mentioned barrier adds weight to this assertion) and it's easy to see how a task like archive migration gets prioritised down the to-do list when viewed against more exciting digital initiatives, particularly when the price of any data loss during the migration process could become significant in the event of litigation, eDiscovery etc, later down the line.

The problem with migrating what you have is that you first have to establish what you have to migrate, and in most organisations this is a lot harder than it sounds. Many decisions need to be made. What do you do about legacy emails stubs, email journals, shared archives? What do you do about user email access during the migration period? What do you do about the communications of former employees?

When compared to live email there can be a colossal quantity and potentially variety of data to move, and it can be a complex task. The process of reviewing the existing archive and deciding what to retain and what to let go can look daunting.

Solution

The benefits of migrating archives to the cloud are clear, but so are the challenges of doing so. There is a strong case for third-party involvement in archive migration to the cloud which can help organisations to avoid making their archives an afterthought in their migration projects. An expert partner can help them to establish what is likely to be the best archiving platform for them and also to answer the numerous questions posed by the archive review process, as well as augmenting skills. Engaging data migration experts and purpose-built migration applications reduces the costs of archive migration and also reduces the risks of downtime and data loss.

With the right technology in place, organisations can enjoy the many benefits of not considering their email archives an afterthought in their migration projects – and build an archive fit for the future.

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