The Benefits of Keeping Your Mail Server on Premises

GFI Software™

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Introduction

Most of the marketing material put out by software
vendors over the last several years would likely lead
you to believe that the entire IT industry has gone
completely all in on the cloud. While it is undeniable
that there are certain advantages to using cloud services,
there can also be advantages to keeping workloads on
premises. This can be especially true for mail servers.

Leverage Your Existing Hardware Investment

One of the nice things about keeping email on premises is that doing so allows you to continue to benefit from your existing hardware investment. Several years ago, I had a conversation with a business owner who had returned from vacation and discovered his backup server unplugged, sitting in a closet. When he asked his IT staff why the backup was disconnected, they told him that they no longer needed it because they had moved backup operations to the cloud, because "that is what you're supposed to do".

The person that I was speaking with said that he was extremely upset by the IT department's decision, because it made absolutely no sense from a business standpoint. The IT department had abandoned a system that was already paid for, and that was working perfectly well, in favor of a cloud based solution which incurred steep monthly fees. According to that person, there was no compelling reason to transition backups to the cloud. The cloud based service did not offer any capabilities beyond what the company already had with their existing solution.

This same basic concept also applies to mail servers. Although there can sometimes be legitimate business reasons for migrating mail services to the cloud, continuing to run email on premises may be the smarter financial decision. This is especially true if the mail server hardware and the software licenses are already paid for.

The Cloud May Be More Expensive in the Long Run

Cloud services are often marketed as being the inexpensive alternative to running comparable services on premises. In many cases however, using a cloud based service will be more expensive in the long run.

Server hardware is a fixed cost. Once an organization has paid for the hardware that it is using (even if, that cost goes away. There may still be support or maintenance costs incurred, but those costs tend to be far less than the hardware acquisition costs (especially if the mail server is running on virtual hardware). In contrast, when you run a workload in the cloud, you are paying for those cloud services month after month, for as long as you need the service.

Over time, these monthly costs may far exceed what it would have cost to purchase the hardware and software necessary to host email on premises.

Administrative Control

The benefits of continuing to operate your mail server on premises extend well beyond the financial considerations. One of the most compelling benefits to operating your own mail server is that doing so gives you complete administrative control.

Hosting providers operate multitenant environments, which means that a single physical server will typically provide mail services for multiple companies. That being the case, the cloud provider cannot give its clients full administrative control (especially at the operating system level), because doing so would compromise the other tenant's security.

Conversely, when you operate your own mail server you have full access to both the operating system, and to the mail server software. This gives you the freedom to make the adjustments that make the most sense for your business.

For example, you can apply patches based on your own patch management policy, rather than hoping that the cloud provider applies security patches in a timely manner. Likewise, having full administrative access to the server gives you the ability to configure the operating system in a way that delivers the optimum level of performance and security.

Additionally, if your organization uses management or monitoring software, then you will be able to deploy agents to your mail server for the sake of monitoring its performance and health. While cloud providers undoubtedly perform health and performance monitoring, they do not generally give tenants access to the monitoring data.

The Noisy Neighbor Syndrome

Yet another argument in favor of operating your own mail server on premises is that doing so ensures that your organization will never fall victim to the noisy neighbor syndrome. As previously noted, cloud providers operate multitenant environments whereby a single physical server host the mail services for multiple companies. If one of the tenants happens to experience a spike in activity, that spike could potentially impact the level of performance seen by other tenants on the server.
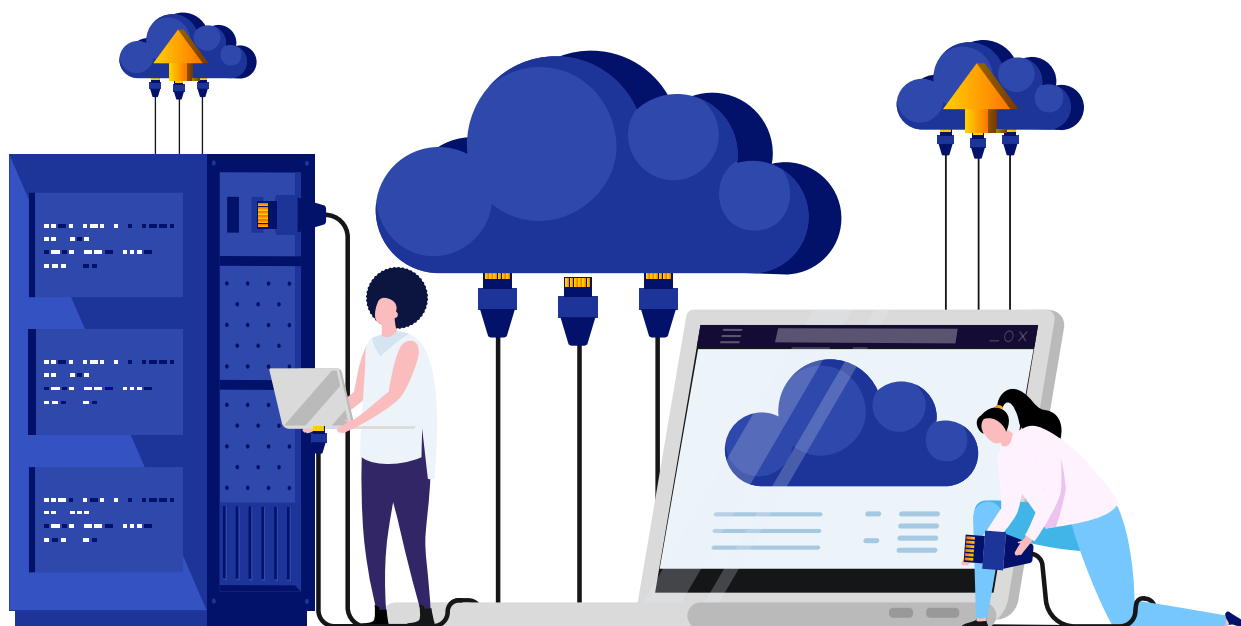
Admittedly, there is a limit to the extent to which the noisy neighbor syndrome can impact another tenant's performance. The reason for this is that cloud providers generally put throttling mechanisms in place to ensure that no one single tenant uses a disproportionate share of the server's performance resources. However, these throttles also mean that a cloud based mail server is never going to provide you with optimum performance because of the limits that are put into place to protect other tenants.

Location of the Data

One of the nice things about operating your own mail server is that the data resides safely in your own data center. You never have to wonder if your data is being backed up, or if it is being adequately protected, because those tasks are handled in-house.

For some organizations, hosting a mail server on premises may make it easier to maintain regulatory compliance. Some regulations prohibit data from being stored in certain geographic locations. When you host your own mail server you are in complete control of where the data physically resides.

Reduced Exposure

Hosting a mail server in your own data center can help to keep your most sensitive messages private. Imagine for a moment that an organization uses a cloud based email provider. If one of the organization's user emails a sensitive document to another user in the organization, that message has to traverse the Internet. This creates at least a potential for the message to be intercepted in route.

If on the other hand, an organization hosts their mail server on premises then a user's message to another user will not have to traverse the Internet, assuming that both are located in the corporate office. Not only does this help to keep the message private, the users may benefit from decreased latency.

Avoid a Complex Migration

Finally, continuing to host a mail server on premises can help an organization to avoid the complexities of a cloud migration. Even though the cloud has matured and cloud migrations are not as complicated as they once were, there can still be a considerable degree of complexity involved in migrating mailboxes to the cloud.

Even if a cloud migration goes smoothly, newly received email messages are sometimes lost during the DNS record switchover that has to occur in order to reroute messages to the cloud host. What is perhaps more troubling however, is that some cloud providers do not offer a clear path for migrating back to an on premises solution should the need arise.
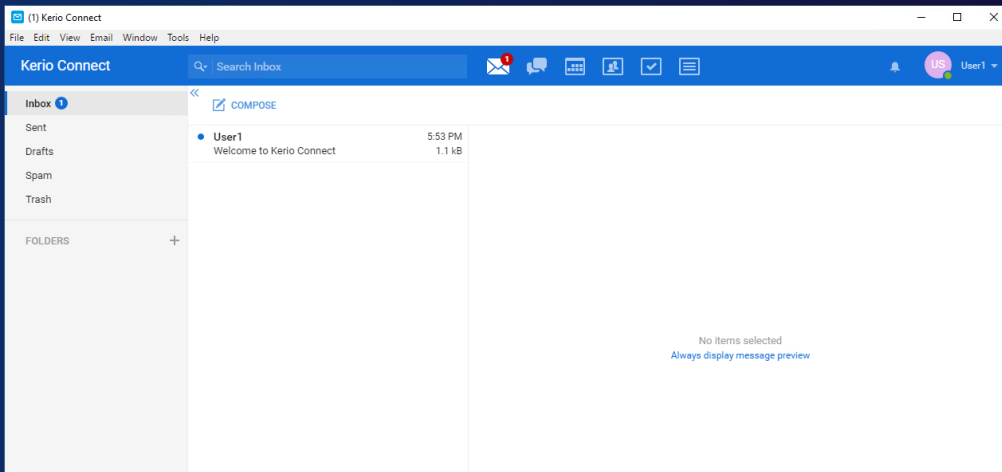
Conclusion

Although cloud providers do their best to entice organizations to migrate their mail servers to the cloud, some adapters inevitably experience cloud remorse. Before buying into the cloud hype, it is important to consider the benefits of keeping your mail services on premises.

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