State University Switches to Microsoft Office 365, Saves $1 Million in Operating Costs

Overview

Country: United States
Industry: Higher education institutions—Universities

Customer Profile
Founded in 1913 and based in Atlanta, Georgia, Georgia State University (GSU) offers more than 250 degree programs with 100 fields of study. It has 32,000 students and employs 6,500 faculty and staff.

Business Situation
GSU needed to replace its aging Novell GroupWise–based email system with more modern technology that would better support anywhere access and scale to support new communication services.

Solution
GSU switched to Microsoft Office 365 for its multiplatform support, rich calendaring capabilities, and cost-effective cloud infrastructure and storage.

Benefits
- Simplified IT management
- Reduced IT costs, rapid return on investment
- Improved productivity and usability
- Flexible mobile device support

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Confronted with an aging communication and collaboration solution that had reached the end of its supported life cycle, Georgia State University (GSU) decided not to update its existing on-premises Novell GroupWise software. Instead, it switched to cloud-based Microsoft Office 365 to better support mobile and remote workers using PCs, Macs, and various mobile devices and to better interoperate with already-planned deployments, including Active Directory and Microsoft Office applications. Soon, students will be upgraded to Office 365 for education from Microsoft Live@edu. Now, GSU has trimmed its annual email-related infrastructure cost by 50 percent, and a simplified IT environment is freeing up the equivalent of 2.5 employees who can be repurposed for other IT tasks. The university is seeing improved employee productivity and expects a five-year savings of about US$1 million.

Situation

Georgia State University (GSU) is one of the Southeast's leading urban research institutions. Its eight colleges serve a diverse community of thousands of full-time and part-time undergraduate and post-graduate students. As with any large organization, the faculty and staff of GSU needs mission-critical enterprise communication and collaboration technology to get their jobs done, and for years GSU has relied on Novell GroupWise to provide it.

In 2010, the version of GroupWise that GSU was using had reached the end of its supported life cycle, and the university concluded that a simple update would be too expensive and not offer sufficiently improved functionality. Instead, GSU wanted to provide its 6,500 faculty and staff with comprehensive support across multiple platforms and devices, from desktop PCs and Macs to tablets and smartphones, and to greatly expand mailbox storage capacity. GSU also needed to reduce the IT infrastructure costs of email-related services, and it was struggling to provide a mere 300 megabytes of storage per mailbox. "We had been looking for a way to migrate away from GroupWise," says J.L. Albert, Associate Provost and Chief Information Officer at Georgia State University. "We didn't perceive GroupWise as a product born of extensive research and development, and we wanted to move to something more advanced."

Interoperability was also a concern. GSU wanted to take better advantage of existing and planned deployments of Microsoft software and technologies, including Microsoft Office applications, the Windows Server 2008 R2 Enterprise operating system, and Microsoft Live@edu which offers GSU free, hosted communication and collaboration services for its 32,000 students. GSU had been using Live@edu since 2009, and that experience had demonstrated to the university how cost-effective a cloud-based approach to communication can be in supporting students. GSU conducted a detailed cost analysis and concluded that a similar approach would work well for its faculty and staff.

With this information in hand, GSU sought a cloud-based solution that would better meet its IT management, storage, and interoperability needs, all while minimizing IT costs.

Solution

In late 2010, GSU began evaluating online solutions, including Google Apps for Business and Google Mail in particular. But that option didn't meet the university's needs. "There were several problems with Google Mail," says Albert. "In addition to functionality limitations, Google Mail had legal issues that could not enable us to restrict and store data within the United States, as policy requires us to. We also wanted support for retention and e-discovery policies that enterprise-class solutions often offer but that Google wasn't even willing to talk to us about." Instead, GSU chose Microsoft Office 365. For organizations of all sizes, Microsoft Office 365 unites familiar Microsoft Office applications with the power of Microsoft Exchange Online, SharePoint Online, and Lync Online into one connected, online solution.

The robust features and zero infrastructure maintenance costs of Office 365 were the key reasons for the university's decision.

Favorite features included:

- Automatically updated email, calendars, and contacts across PCs, Macs, and popular mobile device platforms
- Easy-to-schedule meetings using shared individual, team, and resource calendars with real-time availability information
- Built-in Office Web Apps that provide web-based viewing and editing of Microsoft Office documents
- Rich support for installed Microsoft Office applications
- Built-in email security through Microsoft Forefront protection technologies

GSU worked with Microsoft Services consultants, Microsoft Premier Deployment, and IT partner B2B Technologies to implement the solution. B2B Technologies is a Microsoft Partner Network member with expertise in Microsoft SharePoint portals, Microsoft Exchange email technologies, business intelligence systems, and enterprise application development. "We enthusiastically recommended Office 365 because we recognized that it would meet the needs of GSU in five key areas," says Tonya Smith, Director of Consulting at B2B Technologies. "These include support for Microsoft Outlook Web App, which provides the functionality of the Microsoft Outlook messaging and collaboration client from a web browser, wide-ranging calendaring capabilities in Microsoft Exchange Online, 25 gigabytes of storage space per mailbox, compatibility with Live@edu, and security and privacy features that are much more robust than those in GroupWise."

Planning and testing with the beta version of Office 365 began in early 2011. With a deployment schedule in place, B2B Technologies and Microsoft Premier Deployment assisted with moving mailbox, calendar, and contact data from GroupWise to Exchange Online using Quest GroupWise Migrator for Exchange.

In a separate but concurrent project, GSU and Microsoft Services were migrating the university from Novell Directory Services to Active Directory Domain Services. Microsoft Services consultants provided technical support to ensure the new Active Directory environment would fully support the Office 365 solution with federated identity and single sign-on capabilities.

As part of its academic Enterprise Agreement, GSU also received Microsoft Office Professional Plus—the Office 365 subscription-based version of Microsoft Office Professional 2010—and Microsoft Office for Mac 2011. Office Professional Plus ensures that GSU will always have the latest versions of Microsoft Office desktop applications through continual online updates. "The inclusion of Microsoft Office applications in the solution was important in our final decision and our timing to adopt Office 365," says Albert. "We have many employees, especially Mac users, who depend on Office applications and want full support for Microsoft Outlook as they access Exchange Online."

Data migration for employees' 6,500 accounts (about 1.5 terabytes) was complete by the end of June, and the final switch from GroupWise to Office 365 occurred over the July 4 holiday weekend, just after the official Microsoft release. The physical servers at GSU that previously ran GroupWise were retired or repurposed. "The project went very smoothly. I mean, we completed the final push in just one weekend," says Keith Campbell, Director of Technology Engineering at Georgia State University. "I think this went about as effortlessly as any large email migration can go."

The university is also just beginning to implement Microsoft SharePoint Online to handle file sharing, workflow, and process

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management tasks, in addition to Microsoft Lync Online for instant messaging, conferencing, and desktop sharing. "Given the tight interoperability between Office 365 components, we're confident that the usage of SharePoint Online and Lync Online will grow quickly to become a significant part of our IT environment," says Bill Gruszka, Director of Production Services at Georgia State University. "Once people find out how flexibly SharePoint Online can adapt to different department workflows and how easy Lync Online makes audio and video conferencing, the adoption rate will surely skyrocket."

Finally, Live@edu will soon to be replaced by Microsoft Office 365 for education, which brings the power of Lync Online and SharePoint Online to students in addition to the enterprise-class email service that they were already getting with Live@edu. At that point, faculty, staff, and students will all be on the same cloud service.

Benefits

By deploying Microsoft Office 365, Georgia State University gains an easy-to-manage cloud-based communication and collaboration solution that meets the university's IT storage, reliability, and interoperability needs, all while minimizing IT costs and improving employee productivity.

Simplified IT Management and Infrastructure

By moving to a cloud-based solution, GSU is able to repurpose the personnel who used to spend their time taking care of server hardware and software for other duties and projects. "With Office 365, we're saving the equivalent of 2.5 full-time employees who no longer have to deal with on-premises server administration," says Albert.

Also, the single sign-on technology made possible by the Active Directory migration and supported by Office 365 means that the IT department maintains only one user ID and password per employee. Employees can usually reset the password themselves, saving time for both IT staff and users.

Reduced IT Costs, Rapid Return on Investment

GSU is using Office 365 to reduce its IT costs in several ways. First, the absence of 25 servers, a storage array, and related IT administrative labor translates from saved time into saved money. Second, GSU saves on electricity and cooling system maintenance costs. Also, the third-party licensing costs of some IT management tools, such as antivirus and antispam software, are avoided because they're now built into Office 365. Says Albert, "Using Office 365, we're looking at least a 50 percent reduction in the annual cost of operation, compared with our previous on-premises GroupWise solution, without any hardware depreciation."."

Gruszka adds, "When we look at our total cost of ownership of GroupWise versus Office 365, we estimate we will easily save about [US]$1 million in the first five years." This savings completely offsets the university's initial investment in deploying Office 365. Capital depreciation costs for the server hardware are now eliminated, resulting in even higher savings, from an accounting perspective.

GSU is also gaining vastly increased storage capacity without incurring additional infrastructure costs. Campbell notes that previously users would quickly fill up their 300-megabyte mailboxes. However, "now, we get 25 gigabytes of storage per mailbox included as an Office 365 feature, which is one of the most generous options we've seen. We would never have been able to

afford that kind of storage increase using on-premises methods." The university also no longer has to spend its own time and money backing up all the data.

Improved Productivity and Usability
Although GSU hasn't compiled productivity statistics since deploying Office 365, anecdotal evidence and positive user feedback suggest that employees are now better able to get their jobs done. "We're heavy Microsoft Office users here, so having a solution like Office 365 that so fully supports both web-based and installed client Office applications means that everyone can communicate and collaborate using a consistent, standardized approach," says Gruszka. He notes a specific example of improved productivity—being able to email a document without leaving Microsoft Word, and sending it to someone who can open it in a web browser, even if they don't have Word installed. "That universal accessibility with a standard look and feel is very popular as well as being a productivity boost."

Additionally, GSU has implemented a variety of training options, including in-person and online modules. With this training, faculty and staff are able to quickly adapt to the new user environment that is centered around Microsoft Outlook.

Flexible Mobile Access and Device Support
Finally, remote GSU users benefit from flexible mobile device support in Office 365. The previous GroupWise environment supported synchronization with Blackberry devices, but, according to Campbell, not much else: "Now, along with Blackberry users, our iPhone, Android, and Windows Phone users are happy too. This is a big plus for making our employees more

productive using whatever mobile device they choose."

Albert concludes, "Office 365 has given us professional-quality tools at a great value, robust reliability and security, and an extensible platform that we add communication and collaboration services to as the university's needs grow. Given all these advantages, I think the Office 365 migration is one of the best projects this organization has ever undertaken."

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Microsoft Office 365

Microsoft Office 365 brings together cloud versions of our most trusted communications and collaboration products—Microsoft SharePoint Online, Exchange Online, and Lync Online—with the latest version of our Office desktop suite and companion web applications for businesses of all sizes.

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