



Active Blog
Open Source

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Email Personal Information Management Without Microsoft Exchange

Exchange partnered with Microsoft Outlook creates a powerful E-mail and Shared information environment. Users today expect to be able to access shared resources such as internal address books and mailing lists, calendars which allow schedules / appointment information to be shared plus shared contact lists to allow easy management of external contacts. At the same time users want to be able to manage their own personal calendar and contact lists while maintaining the ability to delegate permissions on these resources.

Microsoft Exchange often comes under criticism in the areas of security, data integrity and cost. With Microsoft Outlook being the defacto standard for many users, what alternatives are there to Exchange while retaining the feature set which makes it so popular?

Open-Xchange Server 5

Open-Xchange Server 5 is a collaboration server that runs on a Linux platform (RedHat Enterprise Linux or Suse Linux Enterprise Server 9) using open source components such as Postfix, Tomcat/Apache, Cyrus and OpenLdap. Here's a small excerpt from the Open-Xchange website:

"Open-Xchange Server 5 provides critical collaborative functions such as e-mail, calendaring, contacts and task management - fully integrated with advanced groupware features such as Documail, Smart Linking, Smart Permissions, document sharing, project tracking, user forums, and a knowledge base. Open-Xchange Server 5 works with the widest variety of browsers, mobile devices and 'rich clients' such as MS Outlook."

Open-Xchange uses a connector to synchronise calendar, task and contact information between Outlook and the server. Public folders are also implemented via the connector. Outlook enabled functionality is the main selling point for Open-Xchange "Real-time functionality at every seat; immediate employee acceptance, and you still get to keep your MS Outlook clients? OPEN-XCHANGE® Server 5.0 delivers all that." A full web-based groupware suite also means that users can log on from anywhere so long as they have access to the Internet and a supported web browser. Data entered via Outlook such as contact and calendar information will be available within the groupware client as it is regularly synchronised by the Outlook OXtender.

Open-Xchange Server 5 is the latest offering from OPEN-XCHANGE Inc whom in the past worked with SUSE Linux AG to produce SUSE Linux Openexchange Server (known as SLOX). I have used and supported both SLOX and Open-Xchange Server 5, unfortunately I consider SLOX to be the better of the two (I say unfortunately as it is no longer available). Open-Xchange Server integrates with the underlying operating system quite poorly, system updates need to be thoroughly tested to ensure that they do not 'break' Open-Xchange—applying an Open-Xchange product update is rather more time consuming than one would hope; any configuration files which have been modified from the default configuration will need to be backed up, then any changes re-applied to the new files after applying the update. This however isn't my greatest aversion. The OXtender Outlook plug-in is rather unstable; the appointment functions of Outlooks calendar (Accept, Tentative or Decline) do not work and in fact have buggy side effects which in themselves make the OXtender a non-starter. The shared contacts functionality is a little better but still buggy and data in Outlook often loses sync with the server. Email is implemented via standard IMAP and SMTP so has no trouble interacting with Outlook or Thunderbird.



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While Open-Xchange has some imperfections, they are mainly related to updates and the Outlook OXtender. For single site installations without the need for shared resources Open-Xchange could well be a viable mail platform—it could work very well if users only work in the web interface rather than Outlook and the connector.

If you require additional information or assistance with this item, please give us a call.