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Ontario auto parts maker gets e-mail 'liposuction'

A mid-sized auto parts manufacturer in Woodbridge, Ont. wanted to stop sending nasty notes to employees, pestering them to better manage their e-mail and save on storage needs. After installing ZL Unified Archive a year ago, the problem is under control and employees have equally open e-mail access.
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by Brian Jackson

IT admin Chris Marangoni knew he was witnessing the creation of an army of inbox monsters, growing e-mail libraries kept by send-happy employees who threw caution to the wind and let their e-mails pile up in excess of 5 GB each.

"It was growing out of control," the director of information systems at Litens Automotive Group recalls. "We were backing up all those mail boxes every night, every month, over and over and over."

The incredibly redundant backup method and unwieldy inbox sizes of the 750-odd employees at the Woodbridge, Ont.-based auto parts manufacturer meant Marangoni had two choices to avert a storage crisis – embark on a campaign to whip employees into shape and slim down their inboxes by manually deleting e-mails, or get e-mail liposuction from a good storage management solution. He chose to implement ZL Unified Archive from San Jose, Calif.-based ZL Technologies Inc.

Litens chose ZL because it offered a product that would plug-in with its Lotus Notes and Domino e-mail platform. It also provided a better search capability, delivered via a Web browser, than the search feature baked into Domino.

"You have no real reliance on Domino to find your mail," Marangoni says. "The beauty is it provides a link in the client to search your mail."

ZL's product fits into a larger puzzle of software firms that offer comprehensive e-mail management solutions to mid-market and larger enterprises. At the same time companies with hundreds to thousands of employees find they are generating exponentially more data, they are also increasingly being asked by government regulators and courts to be more accountable for that data. In order to make ends meet, most firms implement software products combining compliance, e-discovery, records management and storage optimization features.

There are three reasons a mid-sized business might consider such a solution, according to George Goodall, senior research analyst with London, Ont.-based Info-Tech Research Group. It could be a case for IT efficiency, reducing the amount of storage needed for e-mail; or it could be about avoiding lawsuits or punitive regulatory measures related to e-discovery requests; or it could be about improving worker productivity.

"If only I had Google for my intranet" is a common refrain heard in offices, the analyst says, but it's more complicated than that. "To build a business case for this type of technology sometimes involves exploitation of multiple of those factors."

In other words – it's a mixed bag, and companies are looking for all the benefits they can reap.

ZL Unified Archive is Java-based, allowing it to be platform agnostic. It is compatible with both Lotus Notes – about 30 to 40 per cent of the west coast firm's customers, according to ZL CEO Kong Leong – and Microsoft Exchange, accounting for the other 60 to 70 per cent of ZL's customers. It can also be used with multiple database formats, such as Oracle or MySQL.

"It handles unstructured content and manages it for archiving purposes from cradle to the grave," Leong says. "Because of our pedigree, going all the way back to handling small companies' needs, a lot of the administrative overhead is built in and there's less learning required."

ZL got a foothold in the e-discovery market shortly after the dot-com bubble burst. It catered to the needs of small Wall Street brokers at first, then scaled up the chain to provide solutions for the biggest players around. Now it focuses on selling directly to Fortune 500 companies directly, and reaching the mid-sized market through channel partners. That combination of starting with smaller clients and quickly moving up to larger ones gives ZL an advantage, Leong says.

"We lucked out when we designed it for heavy lifting, which was not really contemplated at the time," he says. "We're talking about billions of documents."

Marangoni tried to ask employees to sort through their e-mail manually when storage first became an issue, then locking accounts when they exceeded the limit. "People just ignore quotas and then we're forced to up the quotas or manage the e-mail for them," he says.

ZL's Lotus Notes plug-ins – ZL Offline Sync and ZL Setup Sync – allow employees to keep all the e-mail they want, in a folder structure to their liking. And Marangoni no longer has to nag them about management. It automatically archives e-mail after a certain time period, but the user can still access it in the same manner they would normally. The only difference is a logo indicating the e-mail has been archived.

The trick is knowing what e-mails need to be archived, Leong says. Some "heavy e-mails" are particularly bad storage space users, causing for about 10 per cent of all e-mails to account for 90 per cent of the storage space needed. So ZL can perform "liposuction" on those large e-mails by compressing the body text.

ZL plans to establish a presence in Canada within the next 12 months, he adds. It sees government and the financial sector as likely customers, and is already looking for channel partners to help sell its brand of "email liposuction" to the mid-market. It already has a handful of Canadian customers, including Litens.

It will likely be able to find more enterprises feeling storage pain, says Info-Tech's Goodall. "Storage rates have been ramping rapidly," he says. "That can be challenging because disk is cheap... but storage is expensive."

Lotus Notes users may find limited third-party options for storage management, he says. Microsoft Exchange users have more options, but have to think about the real purpose behind their implementation – is it about IT efficiency, or meeting legal requirements? Some firms may find that upgrading to the latest version of their e-mail platform will allow them to get by with some added capabilities.

Firms planning to migrate from one e-mail platform to another may also want to consider ZL's solution, since its archive model allows for both Lotus Notes and Exchange messages to co-exist.

For now, Marangoni is just happy he's tamed the army of inbox monsters incubating at Litens. Mail archives are now about one-tenth the size, on average, than they used to be. Data backups of live e-mails are done much more quickly, and the search capability is far improved – scouring through multiple message threads and attachments.

"We can now put lower cost storage arrays in place," he says. "Because the file archive is compressed, it can store a lot more mail in the same amount of space."

The IT admin also doesn't miss writing those nagging memos.

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