Exchange Online backup:
Do you really need it?

Introduction

Unexpected downtime is always disruptive and often expensive, especially if it impacts a business-critical platform like Microsoft Office 365. Office 365 offers a 99.9% uptime record, which helps organizations feel comfortable migrating to Office 365's Exchange Online. Geo-redundancy also protects Office 365 setups against site or hardware failure, providing an additional level of reliability for organizations.

Exchange Online data is continuously replicated to multiple databases in geographically-dispersed Microsoft data centers to provide data restoration capability if infrastructure failure occurs. For large-scale failures, service continuity management procedures are initiated and users will remain productive and almost oblivious to these underlying issues.

So with all these protective measures in place, do you really need backups of Exchange Online? The short answer is **yes.**

Geo-redundancy might be effective in helping your organization recover from large-scale infrastructure failures, but it's not the same as a backup. Any unintentional data loss that happens to your Exchange Online setup in one data center will be replicated in all other data centers.

On the other hand, a backup is a historical copy of your Exchange Online data that can be used to recover from accidental data loss or a malicious attack that impacts sensitive data.

Four reasons why you need to back up Exchange Online data

It's true that Office 365 can protect you against widespread infrastructure damage, but these native safeguards still can't help you with:

- Accidental deletions
- External security threats
- Internal security threats
- Meeting legal and compliance mandates

Being aware of the potential pitfalls and the available remedial actions is necessary to make sure that you're prepared for these threats.

1. Accidental deletions

Office 365's geo-redundancy feature is designed to keep your data safe and store your enterprise data in a separate physical location in case one site fails. However, geo-redundancy means that any deletion action is replicated in all other geographic locations, so deleted data will be removed from all Office 365 data centers.

Exchange Online provides a recycle bin that's useful for recovering items from accidental deletion, but there's a caveat: the recycle bin can't hold items forever. Here's how it works:

Deleted Exchange Online items are stored in the Deleted Items folder. Even if the contents of the Deleted Items folder is emptied, these items can still be recovered by the administrator from the Recoverable Items folder. Items in the Recoverable Items folder are kept for 14 days by default, and you can extend this retention setting to a maximum of 30 days (120 days max for calendar entries).

Once the retention period expires, deleted Exchange Online items can't be recovered. You also can't recover items that are removed from the Recoverable Items folder. This storage limitation makes a compelling argument for deploying an Exchange Online backup solution.

2. External security threats

Any security breach will put a dent in your organization's reputation, and viruses and malware—especially ransomware—have been a major threat in recent years. To address these security concerns, Microsoft provides Exchange Online Protection (EOP) as an add-on for combating malware threats. Microsoft guarantees to stop any known malware from entering your mailboxes. However, EOP does not cover any new viruses or malware that may find their way into your mailboxes:

> *"A zero-day virus is a first generation, previously unknown variant of malware that's never been captured or analyzed, so our anti-malware engines don't yet have any definitions available for detecting it. After a zero-day virus sample is captured and analyzed by our anti-malware engines, a definition is created to detect it based on the unique signature of the malware, and it's no longer considered 'zero-day.'"*
> **-Microsoft**

Regular backups will help in overcoming these threats if your systems get infected, but Exchange Online's limited backup and recovery functions are inadequate to handle serious attacks. What you need is a backup solution that can recover any Exchange Online item.

3. Internal security threats

Unfortunately, external threats aren't the only reason for concern; your organization's own employees can cause significant threats, both intentionally and unintentionally.

Exchange Online's security features have no way of distinguishing a regular user from a terminated employee who attempts to delete critical data before they depart. On the other hand, users can unintentionally cause loopholes in security by downloading infected files or accidentally deleting critical data.

To err is human, and it's impossible to completely eliminate these types of internal threats. Implementing a potent backup and recovery solution that can recover any data you might lose is the best solution.

4. Meeting legal and compliance mandates

If your organization ever faces a legal battle, Microsoft offers litigation hold, a feature that secures your mailboxes from being tampered with. When a mailbox is placed in a litigation hold, it prevents anyone from deleting its contents.

However, issues can arise if an active mailbox is held in a litigation hold and you're unable to delete emails or attached files. This opens up two different problems:

- Your storage capacity needs and costs could increase exponentially over time unless you subscribe to Office 365 Enterprise E3 or a higher subscription plan.

- The inability to delete any email or attachment also increases the possibility of malware staying in your mailbox, just waiting for an unsuspecting user to open it.

Most Exchange Online backup solutions compress and store your backups, mitigating both these issues.

Conclusion

Moving to Exchange Online can provide benefits that an on-premises Exchange environment cannot. However, there's still a gap between the level of backup and restoration capabilities you should expect and what Microsoft provides.

You need a backup solution that can provide complete data recovery capabilities to avoid unnecessary data loss scenarios.
Learn more about Exchange Online backup.

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