

Technology Infrastructure

Butler Group Subscription Services

E-Mail Management

TECHNOLOGY AUDIT

Mirapoint, Inc.

Mirapoint Message Server (45-Series)

Abstract *Mirapoint Message Server is a turnkey e-mail appliance designed with the beleaguered IT department in mind. The appliance is based on industry standard hardware components and an optimised version of BSD UNIX. The solution is capable of being rapidly deployed and can easily coexist with existing corporate messaging products. Mirapoint's solution is well proven and leads the market in terms of Total Cost of Ownership. Each unit is highly reliable, and has demonstrated carrier-grade levels of availability. Designed around modular components, Mirapoint Message Server can be deployed as a single appliance solution or as part of a distributed messaging architecture. The solution incorporates an easy to use Webmail interface for end users as well as supporting all industry standard messaging protocols and interfaces. Tight integration with Microsoft Outlook does require a software add-on, but this should not detract from the solution's overall appeal to the corporate market. Exchange 5.5 users should consider this option as an alternative to Exchange 2000/2003.*

KEY FINDINGS

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| ✓ Purpose-built, performant, turnkey e-mail appliance. | ✓ Incorporates Webmail, calendaring, and address book. |
| ✓ Low Total Cost of Ownership (TCO). | ✓ Five-9's reliability and availability with integrated security/hygiene. |
| ✗ Limited collaboration features compared to other solutions. | i Supports NAS, SANs, and clustering. |

Key: ✓ Product Strength ✗ Product Weakness i Point of Information

LOOK AHEAD

A just-released revision of Mirapoint's MOS, offers enterprise-related enhancements to the graphical user interface, features for enhanced backup/restore and collaboration features such as shared folders.

► FUNCTIONALITY

E-mail is fast becoming the primary method of point-to-point business communication between individuals and organisations alike – second only to the telephone; and yet unlike the tried-and-tested telephone network, e-mail systems in use today are often prone to service interruption, disruption, and outage. While IT departments and e-mail administrators are wrestling with spam and viruses coming into the organisation through e-mail, corporate compliance officers and information security managers are grappling to control the content of e-mail leaving the organisation.

This increase in complexity, compounded by the already burdensome problem of on-going software, operating system, and hardware patches and updates, is causing many organisations to reassess the future of their existing corporate e-mail platforms, especially those organisations running Microsoft Exchange Server, for whom the time has now come to decide whether a migration to Exchange Server 2000 or 2003 is the best option going forward.

The beleaguered IT department is also being asked to deliver better IT services while at the same time facing severe budget constraints, and as a result many IT managers are considering the outsourcing of e-mail to managed service providers. However, few organisations feel totally confident with the idea of outsourcing their corporate e-mail system, and so many organisations are initially using these companies to filter out spam and virus from inbound e-mail.

Many enterprise and line-of-business applications now provide points of integration with e-mail systems – Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems in particular – and so companies and organisations are keen to find a middle ground that enables them to keep e-mail in-house but at a much lower cost of ownership than at present.

Product Functionality

A corporate messaging system needs to offer more than just e-mail: calendaring, scheduling, forms, to-do lists, and shared folders are all ‘must-have’ components of any corporate groupware solution. E-mail is the de facto tool for collaboration within the enterprise and beyond, and so any suggestion that it is to be ‘tinkered’ with or replaced by a more ‘cost-effective’ solution is likely to make end users rather jittery. It is therefore vitally important that any proposed replacement solution delivers everything that the old one did, and more.

E-mail green-field sites do of course exist – new organisations are formed on a daily basis and existing ones expand into new territories – therefore the market for e-mail solutions is still a significant one. Two examples of potential green-field territories are the ‘deskless’ work force and the growing trend in server consolidation. However, as e-mail is considered by many to be the most commoditised of IT services, prospective vendors must now offer something more than a standards-based Message Transfer Agent (MTA) with a Web-based client and a bunch of groupware features; their offering must be scalable, low-cost, secure, robust, easy to manage, and of course cheap to run.

Mirapoint’s e-mail solution offering takes the form of an appliance – indeed a range of appliances. An appliance can be defined as a specialised piece of equipment that is limited to performing a specific task or range of tasks. Unlike traditional servers which are capable of performing a wide range of functions through the use of computer applications, an appliance is designed and optimised to do just one thing – and to do that one thing very, very well.

The Mirapoint Message Server provides organisations with all of the features of a traditional corporate messaging solution in a single, highly optimised package. Running on a hardened version of BSD UNIX and delivered in a rack-mountable unit, the Mirapoint Message Server delivers standards-based message routing, storage, management, and multi-mode client access capabilities at a very attractive price-performance ratio.

Beyond the focus of this Butler Group Technology Audit but worth noting, Mirapoint offers a standalone e-mail security appliance – called RazorGate – which can be configured to work with any e-mail server (Microsoft Exchange, Lotus Notes, etc.). Mirapoint also has a standalone Directory Server appliance which is offered as part of large messaging deals. This combination of products enables Mirapoint to offer organisations a complete end-to-end e-mail solution that is, in Butler Group's opinion, comparable to any corporate messaging solution on the market today.

Featuring integrated spam technology and resistant to virus and hacker attacks, the Mirapoint Message Server is capable of delivering e-mail, calendaring, group scheduling, corporate address book, and to-do lists in a secure and highly performant manner. Independent testing has shown the Mirapoint solution to be highly reliable, with proven ability to deliver 99.999% availability.

Although Mirapoint Message Server provides a well-designed and highly functional Webmail client interface out-of-the-box, Microsoft Outlook users are catered for by an add-on module (Outlook SynQ) that synchronises a user's calendar, contacts, and to-do list, thereby enabling relatively seamless transition from existing e-mail solutions to Mirapoint Message Server.

Messaging

The Webmail feature provided by Mirapoint Message Server can be utilised via standard Web browsers such as Netscape Navigator or Microsoft Internet Explorer. Three Webmail views are provided to suit the capabilities and requirements of the end user and his or her device. The most functional Web interface presents e-mail in an AutoPreview format that will feel instantly familiar to a user of Microsoft Outlook. A second mode of use presents each message in its own window. The third mode is a lightweight interface designed for low-bandwidth users or text-only browsers – cell phones and Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) for example. WAPmail and I-mode support enable highly mobile users to access their e-mail natively from compatible cell phones and PDAs. PDA SynQ is a free add-on to Intellisync Handheld Edition that enables the user to synchronise his or her calendar, address book, and to-do list to a Palm handheld or Pocket PC device.

In common with many Webmail products in use today, Mirapoint's solution comes complete with a spell checker (with personalised dictionary) and rich data entry features. Users can also attach files, embed Uniform Resource Locators (URLs), and cut and paste to and from the Web-based interface. A feature known as Getmail enables users to collect messages from other Post Office Protocol (POP) e-mail accounts, and uses colour-coding in order to easily identify which account the message was addressed to. Although many organisations discourage employees from accessing personal e-mail while at work, Getmail does enable individuals to access personal e-mail but with the provision of virus and spam checking. Administrators can control the frequency with which users retrieve their POP e-mail messages through the use of a feature called POP Minpoll.

Internet Message Access Protocol (IMAP) enables users with e-mail clients such as Microsoft Outlook, Outlook Express, and Eudora to access and manage the contents of their inbox while disconnected from the network or working offline. In using IMAP, users can keep messages on the Mirapoint Message Server until they delete them in much the same way as Microsoft Exchange or Lotus Notes users do today.

Calendaring

WebCal and GroupCal provide the personal and group calendaring features of Mirapoint Message Server. GroupCal can be used to create and modify individual or group events or to book resources such as meeting rooms, projection equipment, or pool cars. WebCal is used to manage personal appointments and to-do lists. Free/Busy lookups are supported along with recurring events; users can allow others to view their calendar, and meeting requests can be automatically generated and sent to users of other e-mail systems. Meeting reminders can be sent via e-mail or mobile devices – an increasingly important feature as more end users find themselves working ‘on location’.

User Management and Administration

Over 50% of all calls made to the corporate Help Desk are related to user identity and access management. Password resets, user provisioning, and application access can seriously drain IT resources if not handled effectively and efficiently. Enterprises with an established corporate directory can make use of Mirapoint Message Server’s Lightweight Directory Access Protocol (LDAP) auto-provisioning feature, whereby creating an account for a new user on an LDAP server can then enable the creation of an e-mail inbox, the first time that user logs on to the Mirapoint system.

The LDAP database can also be used to deliver Class of Service. For example, in a number of Enterprises there are different types of users that may only need Webmail capabilities or limited collaboration features such as the deskless workforce. Whatever the requirement, LDAP entries can be used to manage the service delivered to the various e-mail constituencies. Webmail preferences can also be stored within the LDAP server – useful if the user’s mailbox has to be moved between servers for any reason.

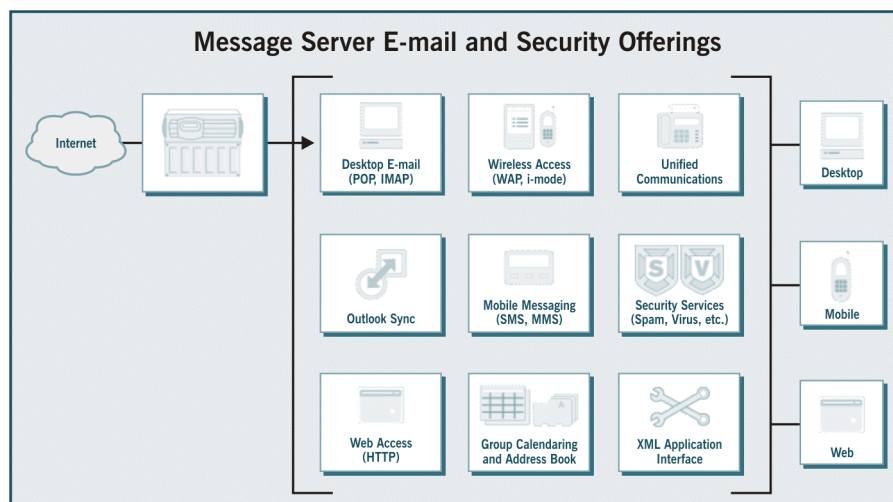


Figure 1: Mirapoint Message Server

Many organisations have standardised on NT-based authentication, and as a result many application vendors utilise this service in order to accommodate Single Sign-On (SSO). SSO can significantly reduce calls to the PC Help Desk, as end users only have one user ID and password to remember. While Mirapoint Message Server allows users to change their password via Webmail, we are not entirely convinced that this is entirely suited to a corporate environment. However, several authentication methods are supported (local database, LDAP, Network Information System (NIS), Kerberos, and RADIUS) thereby enabling Mirapoint to integrate with SSO solutions.

One area requiring careful consideration is that of mailbox security and flexibility relating to the use of IMAP with Microsoft Outlook (or any other IMAP client for that matter). Accessing the Mirapoint Message Server requires user authentication, and because users will not want to type their credentials – including password – in every time their e-mail contacts the server, most organisations will opt for ‘hard coding’ of username and password within the e-mail client.

If the client operating system is Windows NT, Windows 2000 Professional, or Windows XP then we are fairly confident that user credentials stored within Microsoft Outlook are unlikely to be compromised; however, organisations with desktops running Windows 9x would be ill-advised to adopt this approach as it is relatively easy to compromise the security of this operating system. We would advise organisations running Windows 9x to standardise on Mirapoint's Webmail interface instead.

One very important feature of Mirapoint Message Server is its ability to support languages other than English. End users are able to select the language of their choice once the appropriate language pack has been installed on the Mirapoint system.

Primarily of interest to Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and Enterprises with multiple business units or brand domains, Mirapoint Message Server supports Delegated Domains. Each Delegated Domain has its own administrator, address book, distribution lists, etc., and can have its own filtering rules.

The Mirapoint system defines four levels of administration: Administrator, Helpdesk, Domain, and Backup. Top level administrators can assign lower-level administration rights to other users on the system, thereby distributing the often burdensome role of password-resets, user provisioning, and data recovery to local administrators. While most day-to-day administration tasks will be carried out through the browser-based Graphical User Interface, Mirapoint Message Server also supports a command-line interface. The provision of such an interface permits the use of scripts (Perl, Python, C, Java, etc.) to automate many tasks within the system. To restrict administrator access to specific 'known' workstations, Mirapoint Message Server uses a feature called Trusted IPs. An attempt to connect to the administration service from an IP address not on the Trusted IP list will be denied.

Security

Mirapoint Message Server includes a junk e-mail filter that checks for incoming spam, i.e. unsolicited and undesirable e-mail. Given that over 75% of all e-mail crossing the Internet is spam, Butler Group would advise organisations to consider an external spam filtering service in order to remove those messages which are clearly unsolicited. Block-lists and Allow-lists are a feature of this solution, and can be configured by end users. Mirapoint Message Server can also be configured to enforce corporate e-mail policy through the application of rules. These rules can block suspicious, offensive, and sensitive messages from being sent by end users – a very important feature, as organisations are legally responsible for the e-mail messages sent by their employees. Mirapoint's dedicated e-mail security product, RazorGate, should be considered by organisations seeking a perimeter-based e-mail security solution, as Mirapoint would not typically recommend the direct connection of Mirapoint Message Server to the Internet, except for very small customers.

Other security features found in Mirapoint Message Server include: MailHurdle – an edge blocking technology that stops spam and saves network resources by challenging the sending server to ensure its RFC compliance; content filtering – capable of scanning message headers, bodies, and most attachments; Rapid Anti-Spam – a real-time outbreak detection technology; and integrated anti-virus, based on Sophos.

The Mirapoint solution supports secure connections over SMTP, POP, IMAP, HTTP, API, and LDAP. Secured Sockets Layer (SSL) encrypts these protocols, thereby ensuring the highest levels of confidentiality and security. In addition to the use of SSL, Mirapoint Message Server supports SMTP authentication, Simple Network Management Protocol (SMTP) Maximum Recipients, and SMTP Maximum Message Size – all of which prevent this solution from becoming a spam or virus relay.

Mailbox Features

As a fully-featured corporate e-mail solution, Mirapoint Message Server delivers the entire range of mailbox features found in other popular messaging systems. The product's single message store architecture cuts down on the amount of storage required for e-mails sent to multiple recipients within the enterprise. Server-based capabilities include automatic reply, message forwarding, and message filtering – all of which allow users to control the flow of e-mail when they are either away from the office, on-location, or on holiday.

Mailbox quotas, message aging, and message undelete features enable e-mail administrators to deal with common issues of storage and information retrieval. A mailbox copy feature also allows administrators to easily move mailboxes between Mirapoint Message Servers should the need arise.

► DEPLOYMENT

For small installations the implementation process is usually very short (well within the day), and can be accomplished quickly and easily by any technician familiar with basic network and e-mail protocols. If any installation support is required then this can usually be provided over the phone by Mirapoint or a partner. Clearly more complex installations will require additional knowledge and skills, and here Mirapoint can offer the services of a systems engineer. Mirapoint Professional Services can also be called upon to help with the migration of large numbers of user mailboxes – a task becoming increasingly more common as organisations move on from many first-generation corporate messaging systems.

Mirapoint appliances (Message Server, Message Director, RazorGate, and Directory Server) can be deployed to provide any function in a corporate messaging network. These appliances are capable of providing routing, storage, access (proxy), management (directory), or security. For example, Mirapoint Message Server can be configured as a complete e-mail solution, whereas the RazorGate appliance can be configured to work alongside a non-Mirapoint e-mail server – such as Microsoft Exchange Server – to provide just routing and security functions.

Once up and running, a Mirapoint Message Server can be administered, monitored, and managed from a single console. Performance monitoring tracks SMTP, POP, IMAP, Directory Server, and message traffic. Graphical output of server activity enables system administrators to monitor peak traffic times and can be used to produce management reports. External monitoring of Domain Name Servers, routers, LDAP servers, and Network Time Protocol (NTP) servers is possible with Mirapoint Message Server, thereby providing a complete view of an organisation's messaging infrastructure. Product documentation is excellent, being clear and easy to follow.

Detailed logs are compiled daily on the Mirapoint Message Server, and can be sent every night to a distribution list. Weekly reports present information summarised by the hour and can also be sent to a distribution list. Mirapoint's pro-active approach to customer service is helped by the fact that system alerts and log files generated by the system can be sent directly to Mirapoint customer service. These alerts are tracked by customer support and are one of the reasons why the company can boast 5-9's availability. Mirapoint Message Server also supports real-time monitoring through the SNMP, and will therefore plug-in to most enterprise management frameworks.

One of the most compelling aspects of Mirapoint Message Server is reduced Total Cost of Ownership (TCO). By developing a technology stack dedicated to a single purpose, upgrades and patches can be applied in much less time and with greater confidence than more traditional e-mail solutions.

Mirapoint Message Server can co-exist alongside other e-mail server solutions, and indeed many Mirapoint customers run mixed environments in order to align end-user needs with the right level of service.

The administration of Mirapoint Message Server is relatively straightforward. However, for administrators that would like to increase their message network knowledge, the company does provide a range of training programmes. Training classes for various skill levels and technical areas are provided by Mirapoint, either on-line or in monthly training classes at Mirapoint's headquarters.

Mirapoint's front-line support is provided through IBM Global Services, with second-tier support handled by Mirapoint itself. The Mirapoint support team is distributed across the US, Europe, and Japan.

The core appliance plus appropriate licenses is priced on a one-time basis, with the only recurring costs being support and annual subscriptions for anti-virus and anti-spam updates. A typical deal-size for a Mirapoint Message Server solution would fall between US\$150-250k.

► PRODUCT STRATEGY

The Mirapoint range of appliances includes Mirapoint Message Server, RazorGate, and Directory Server. Each appliance consists of integrated hardware, storage, OS, and relevant application components. Individual features for the relevant products, including POP, IMAP, Webmail, Group Calendar, Anti-Spam, Anti-Virus, LDAP Routing, etc, are sold individually or in some cases bundled as license keys that can be enabled on the appliances. The company also offers a number of standalone options as well as bundled packages, and these are aligned with specific customer requirements, an example would be an Enterprise bundle.

Currently Mirapoint sells to the enterprise, service providers, higher-education, and government. As well as the direct approach to sales and marketing, Mirapoint appliances are also available through channel partners and a few select System Integrators such as Cable & Wireless, CSC, LogicaCMG, IBM Global Services, and Fujitsu.

In addition to technology partnerships with anti-virus and anti-spam companies Sophos and Commtouch, Mirapoint continues to develop partnerships with storage and backup vendors such as HP, Legato, NetApp, and Tivoli.

Key competitors for Mirapoint include Microsoft, Lotus, Sun, and Novell.

Mirapoint was started with the vision of providing end-to-end, easy to use, e-mail-server and security appliances, and the company intends to stay true to this focus and will continue to service the increasingly critical message networks that businesses and consumers depend on.

► COMPANY PROFILE

Mirapoint, which was founded in 1997, is headquartered in Sunnyvale, California, US, with offices in the UK, France, Germany, Australia, China, Japan, and Singapore. The company, which is privately owned, has over 800 customers representing approximately 60 million mailboxes. Key clients include: Cisco, Ford, RSA Security, University of Georgia, Alex Lee, Space Telescope Science Institute, and Cape Clear.

The company is headquartered in the heart of Silicon Valley where the majority of development takes place. The company also employs around 30 engineers working in India. Mirapoint grew significantly in 2004 and continues to expect double-digit employee growth over the coming 12 months.

As a privately held company Mirapoint does not disclose revenue figures; however, the company just recorded a 40% revenue increase for the fiscal year and has set a new company record of five consecutive quarters of growth. The company also doubled its engineering department and now boasts over 175 employees. Mirapoint does around half of its business in US and has a healthy mix of direct and indirect sales, with over 50 channel partners distributed around the world.

► SUMMARY

Mirapoint Message Server is an e-mail appliance which provides standards-based message routing, storage, management, and multi-mode client access. It provides Webmail, group calendaring, to-do lists, and address book services, and fully supports POP3, IMAP4, HTTP, SMTP, and LDAP, thereby enabling this solution to integrate with a multitude of client-side applications and devices including Microsoft Outlook, PDAs, and WAP devices. At a time when many organisations are considering the future of their corporate messaging infrastructure, the turnkey design of this and other Mirapoint appliances offers both an attractive and compelling alternative to traditional server-based e-mail solutions. E-mail is now a business critical application for most organisations, and must therefore be reliable, secure, performant, and scalable. Mirapoint Message Server hits the mark in all areas and is one of the most cost-efficient e-mail solutions on the market to-boot.

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