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Novell hits the mark

By P.J. Connolly
July 27, 2001

WHEN YOUR MESSAGING system goes offline, business grinds to a halt. Maybe it's not always an excuse to go home early, but it certainly crimps one's effectiveness. In the past decade, e-mail has become like the telephone system: You expect it to always work. It's clear that the most important features of messaging and groupware systems are reliability, scalability, and security. But for a long time, security has received short shrift.

For most people, anything that you could put a password on to keep out the casual intruder was considered secure enough. Now, e-mail viruses are as common as colds, and they spread by taking advantage of weaknesses in e-mail servers and client software.

Today, the vastly expanded world of messaging software offers fertile ground for attackers. With only 26 million users, Novell's GroupWise lags far behind IBM Lotus Domino/Notes' 66.1 million users and Microsoft Exchange/Outlook's 57.4 million users according to analyst firm IDC. However, Novell's lower market share also means less attention from hackers, resulting in a slightly higher degree of security against hacks designed to exploit more popular messaging software.

No messaging system is invulnerable, but it is clear that using Microsoft Exchange is asking for trouble, because many attackers take advantage of the product's integration with other Microsoft technologies, which unfortunately allows hackers to quickly compromise or disable clients and servers alike. GroupWise isn't so vulnerable.

With its latest version, GroupWise 6 runs on Windows NT/2000 servers with NDS (Novell Directory Services) installed, and its competitors can no longer dismiss it as a niche solution for a failed platform. Nor can we: GroupWise 6 earns our highest rating of Deploy.

Thin-client plus simplicity key

GroupWise has an interesting history, being the only product Novell kept for itself when it sold WordPerfect to Corel in 1996 after an ill-fated spree of

itself when it sold WordPerfect to Corel in 1996 after an ill-fated spree of acquisitions that were intended to turn Novell into a Microsoft competitor on the desktop. Since those beginnings, GroupWise has matured nicely, and in this -- its sixth major release-- it stakes out new ground in the areas of Web and wireless access.

Novell is targeting GroupWise 6's new accessibility features at what it calls the "deskless work force," those employees who've never taken to e-mail because they are never in the office to read it. Perhaps the most telling indication of Novell's new approach is the pricing for GroupWise 6: Web or wireless client access costs $30 per user, compared to $130 for the traditional fat client. This contrasts favorably to Exchange, which offers wireless access features through Microsoft's new Mobile Information Server, an add-on with additional cost.

The Web client for GroupWise is no limited-feature hack; the handful of fat client features that aren't available in the Web client are those that don't apply, such as local storage management. A full suite of Web-based management tools is also included. Wireless access is more limited, but this is to be expected given the relative newness of the handheld interface.

Functionality hums

GroupWise 6 runs on either NetWare 5 or Windows NT/2000 servers and it requires access to NDS on the server, but that's the only catch. We kept our testing simple by setting up all of the GroupWise components on a single NetWare 5.1 server, but there are still plenty of ways to scale your GroupWise mail system in the real world. In some cases it may be desirable to run the GroupWise Web Access components on a machine outside your firewall while keeping the servers with the post office databases inside.

For a truly unstoppable system, GroupWise resources exploit the features of NetWare Clustering Services to allow near-instantaneous failover to other servers in a cluster. Of course, the other side of scaling is consolidation; acquisitions, mergers, and reorganizations create a continuous push to combine formerly autonomous mail systems. GroupWise has been able to support multiple post offices on a server for some time, but the management tools -- now built around Novell's ConsoleOne framework -- finally support the ability to drag-and-drop users from one post office to another while retaining important attributes such as shared folders.

A few quirks remain for Novell to iron out for future releases. GroupWise's installation process needs streamlining; Version 6 includes three separate routines: one for the core GroupWise installation, another to configure Internet messaging, and still another to configure Web and wireless services. Other setup tasks are necessary to install additional management tools, but we think it's best to let customers decide how open they want their systems to be, so those should remain separate.

Novell's documentation is generally helpful and well organized, but key parts of the online documentation were unavailable during our testing in mid-July. When the installation instructions refer users online, it's inexcusable that the information you need is AWOL several weeks after the first product shipment. That aside, you should plan to spend a couple of days pulling everything together, from installing the server OS, patches, and GroupWise itself, then fully testing the Web and wireless features.

But we'll take a tedious installation over a finger-crosser every time. When all

But we'll take a tedious installation over a finger-crosser every time. When all the software has been copied over and your users are set up with client software, you can expect a pretty smooth ride. Of course, your beepers will be ringing more often than is usual, if only because you'll be fine-tuning the system's alerting features and baselines to match actual traffic patterns. Otherwise, GroupWise 6 is a solid performer that easily earns our recommendation to deploy in any enterprise.

P.J. Connolly (pj_connolly@infoworld.com) covers groupware, networking, operating systems, and security for the Test Center.

BOTTOM LINE
GroupWise 6

BUSINESS CASE
This secure and stable messaging platform provides a 77 percent discount for using a Web or wireless client, savings that should make cost-conscious managers pay attention.

TECHNOLOGY CASE
By making mobile messaging a built-in feature instead of an expensive add-on, Novell is wisely trying to capitalize on the market for mobile access.

PROS
+ Integrated Web and wireless support
+ No fat client, which lowers cost
+ Client and server unaffected by VBScript e-mail worms targeting Exchange

CONS
- Installation process in need of streamlining
- Incomplete documentation

PLATFORM INFO
NetWare or Windows NT/2000 server with NDS (GroupWise server); Windows 9x/Me/NT/2000 (GroupWise client); Web browser or WAP-enabled device

COST
$130 per user with full client access; $30 per user with Web or wireless client only

COMPANY
Novell Inc.; www.novell.com/groupwise

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