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Secure practices for archiving data and emails in the cloud

In business today, data and email that are no longer being accessed still need to be saved. At best, this information may be needed for reference to a new project. At worst, it may need to be accessed to respond to customer complaints, defend lawsuits, or to prove compliance with state or federal regulations.

So archiving data and emails is important. Where to store it all is the question.

If you're thinking that backing up data is a sufficient solution, think again. Backing up and archiving have two very different goals:

- Backup is done in case technology fails. Backups make it possible to recover all or part of the applications and information stored on your company IT network.

- Archiving is more file-based. It offers an easy way for users to access individual files from storage if they are ever needed.

Choose which archiving medium to use.

Archiving data is like putting it into long-term storage. There are a number of ways to do this. Because of the long-term aspect of this decision, it's important to make sure the file format you choose for archiving isn't one that could become obsolete, deteriorate or become inaccessible or unreadable in the future.

Unfortunately, there's no way to predict which types of storage devices will stand the test of time. Tape storage (which can deteriorate over time) has already become outmoded. Zip drives were once a standard but are now long gone -- as are the parallel ports they once used to connect to PCs. There's no way to predict how long CDs, DVDs or other optical media will be around. USB thumb drives and other solid-state storage devices may or may not survive.

So it's important to try to pick the archiving medium that has the best chance of being supported over the long term. This makes cloud-based storage the most logical option for long-term storage and, due to the many available providers of the service, it is becoming more and more affordable. In the process of deciding which provider/vendor to use to archive your data, it's important to consider these four essentials:

1. Security: Provide security that is compliant with legal requirements applicable to your industry
2. Search: Have the ability to search for documents in the archives based on date, file size, type of document, and the dates it's been accessed
3. Access: Provide access to individual files as needed.
4. Protection: Ensure that files cannot be changed as well as keep a record of who has accessed the file and when. This is very important in case of legal challenges.

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Ensure that data will be accessible in the future.

Changing technology not only affects which medium should be chosen for backups, but it also affects future accessibility. Most documents are written in what are called proprietary formats. A document written in today's Microsoft® Word or Outlook® may be unreadable 10 to 15 years from now.

You have two options for ensuring that data is accessible and readable in the future.

1. Convert Data: Archive files in their original proprietary formats and also convert and save each one in an open-standard format. By doing that, you can access the data in the future, even if the proprietary format it was written in goes away. There are many of these conversion programs available online to help you make these conversions.

2. Save Original Applications: When saving the files, also save a copy of the application that makes the proprietary format accessible.

Remember, not all data is equal.

Before establishing your archiving protocol, you'll want to review which data must be saved indefinitely and which must be saved for only a certain number of years. Depending on regulations affecting your industry, it may not be necessary to save customer communications for a select number of years. If you are using offline storage, space is a consideration. If you are using online, cloud-based storage, the amount of data you store can affect your storage costs. So storing data that does not need to be saved can be costly.

Address your archiving choice annually.

If you are using hardware-based storage mechanisms for archiving data, you'll want to review the choice each year to determine when and if this data should be moved to another medium. If you are using a cloud-based service, you'll want to re-evaluate whether the vendor you have chosen has the security, performance and service that fits your current needs.

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