Making the Move to Office 365

Houston Symphony Moves from Google Mail to Microsoft Office 365
Houston Symphony is a not-for-profit organization and professional orchestra performing a variety of musical pieces every year in Houston, TX. The first concert of what would become the Houston Symphony took place in 1913. The small orchestra disbanded shortly in 1918 and reformed in 1930, officially becoming the Houston Symphony in 1936. The orchestra has been performing in the Jesse H. Jones Hall for the Performing Arts since 1966.

Today, the Houston Symphony employs 110 full-time staff, and an additional 100+ musicians, interns, and vendors. With ticket sales averaging 33,000 per year, Houston Symphony offers a series of concerts, including classical, POPS, family focused specials, summer and community performances.
Houston Symphony staff were frustrated using an outdated version of Microsoft Office and the organization faced increased challenges operating on the Gmail platform. The non-federated access created security concerns, and there was no effective collaboration platform in place. Looking to help reduce staff frustrations and improve the overall working environment at Houston Symphony, the IT department sought an alternate solution.

They ultimately chose to work with Rand Group and migrate their organization to Microsoft Office 365.
Business Challenges

Houston Symphony was operating their email and calendar system using Google Apps for Work, namely Gmail and Calendar.

With 110 in-house staff and an additional 100 low-volume users such as interns and musicians, the non-federated access afforded by Gmail was problematic. The IT department also required higher levels of control and wanted to access the benefits associated with an enterprise solution. Employees of the Houston Symphony perform upwards of 50% of their daily tasks in email, and there is a significant reliance on collaborative calendars. The lack of features offered by Gmail was starting to constrain business and concern IT.

Looking for single vendor support was another catalyst. Houston Symphony was running a predominantly Window's based environment but their Gmail applications weren’t being properly supported. They were working with multiple vendors, which was driving up cost and increasing confusion.

Finally, staff were becoming increasingly frustrated with their outdated version of Microsoft Office, noting that they were still using Microsoft Office 2010.
Following a larger overall IT Assessment, the Houston Symphony worked with Rand Group to determine how to handle their email constraints, while at the same time allowing staff to access the latest version of Microsoft Office. After evaluating the options, Houston Symphony IT Director Desmond Robinson, along with the rest of the IT department, chose to subscribe to Microsoft Office 365 companywide and migrate their email and calendar system.

The decision was made in part due to the desire for better integration, as well as access to a single vendor. Further, it was noted that Microsoft brings with it a maturity and that the enterprise features inherent in the Microsoft platform would better enable Houston Symphony to conduct their business. Another factor which played heavily into the decision making was cost. Being a not-for-profit, Houston Symphony is very price-sensitive, and the IT department is highly budget conscious.

The costs speak for themselves. As Desmond Robinson noted, “you simply cannot buy, build and maintain hardware and licenses for a lower price point than you can get into the cloud with Microsoft.”

Office 365 allowed Houston Symphony to remain in the cloud with their email and calendar solution while at the same time avoiding the design, purchase, implementation and maintenance of the necessary infrastructure required to run an on-premise solution. They were able to enjoy all the benefits of a complete Microsoft Office experience, complete with integrations, current versions, and improved mail functions, without incurring large ongoing overhead expenses to build and maintain it.
The Project

Gmail does not easily facilitate enterprise level moves, which meant Rand Group had to help Houston Symphony individually move each user to the new system or leverage a third-party application. Choosing a third-party application, Rand Group was able to quickly and effectively move all users with little to no downtime. The 110 main users received full access to Outlook webmail, device based Outlook email and calendars, and the entire suite of Microsoft Office products, in the cloud. The low-volume users received Outlook Webmail, which is accessible from anywhere.

The one area that proved to be a challenge during the project was the integrity of the calendar. Houston Symphony relies heavily on their shared calendars and through the transition some information loss occurred. However, Rand Group was able to resolve the calendar issues, and went beyond to ensure calendar integrity was restored.

Throughout the project, Rand Group and Houston Symphony worked in tandem to adjust timelines and accommodate for the pace at which the Houston Symphony needed to work.

“Rand Group provided flexible timelines to meet our needs, and to accommodate hectic schedules and our inability to quickly drive and make change,” says Robinson “we were able to implement at a pace that worked for the culture of Houston Symphony, and that was really important.”
The Results

The move to Office 365 with hosted email has improved the daily lives of the staff at Houston Symphony.

The staff has enjoyed the upgrade to their office products, while also experiencing greater satisfaction with their email service, including better archiving and improved search. The Office 365 platform is now providing Houston Symphony with real collaboration, which is more supportive of business processes and allows them to communicate more effectively across the organization and with outside vendors.

The IT Department noted that the enterprise solution has afforded them better manageability and control while providing proper visibility into ongoing user interactions. The federated access has improved the safety and security of the information, and moving their entire Exchange environment to Microsoft Azure has improved storage and collaboration. There has also been a significant improvement in Houston Symphony’s ability to manage spam through filters, and detect and trace malware. Further, by using a hosted solution from a single vendor, licensing complications have become a thing of the past. Finally, and of significance, is the fact that Houston Symphony is no longer responsible for the design, purchase, implementation and maintenance of the hardware needed to manage their email and Office services, which are now able to immediately scale as the company requires.

“The team at Rand Group cared about our success over and above everything else,” noted Desmond Robinson, “they put the time and effort into making this project work, and I never felt squeezed for a dollar. The conversation was always about needs and requirements, resources and meeting expectations. The Houston Symphony doesn’t have the means to purchase a vendor’s loyalty, and getting the quality and care we did from Rand Group at a price we could manage was instrumental in the success of this project.”

Overall, the Houston Symphony has been able to increase the productivity of all members of their staff, and the IT department has reduced overhead and infrastructure requirements, and has been able to focus more attention on critical tasks that drive business success.

Following this project, Houston Symphony opted to move to the next phase of the engagement with Rand Group, including the adoption of OneDrive and design and implementation of SharePoint.
Finding the right vendor was key to the success of the project. Being a not-for-profit organization, Houston Symphony needed a partner in this endeavor. They wanted a single point of contact for the overall upcoming IT project and noted that Rand Group’s experience with Microsoft products, as well as their long history of supporting the arts and the overall business acumen available on staff were major decision points for the Symphony.

Robinson had this final thing to say:

“I don’t see Rand Group as consultants, I see them as an extension of my IT department. They are always there when we need them and bring a quality of service and technical sophistication that we so desperately need. Now I can provide quality service to the entire Houston Symphony organization without concern. Rand Group helps me sleep at night”.
“Rand Group is truly invested in us. They went above and beyond to make sure we were happy and that our expectations were met, and they provided the quality and service we needed to truly be successful. Every interaction was approached with enthusiasm and detail, and always centered on our needs.”

Desmond Robinson, Director of IT, Houston Symphony
Rand Group delivers full-spectrum expertise to help clients:
- Accelerate profitability
- Decrease operational costs
- Mitigate business risk

- Efficiently optimizing business since 2003