



PREPARING FOR EXCHANGE ONLINE UNIFIED MESSAGING CHANGES

By Nathan O'Bryan

What to do when Microsoft removes existing functionality from Office 365?



Microsoft's Office 365 is a constantly evolving cloud service, and that evolution is not going to slow down anytime soon. Every week there are new services, features, and functionality being made available in your Office 365 tenant and that's great. Sometimes, however, Microsoft finds it necessary to remove existing functionality from Office 365.



Microsoft recently announced some changes to the Unified Messaging functionality within Exchange Online. These changes are going to remove functionality for a subset of Office 365 customers who want to connect to a third party PBX. If you're one of those customers you will need to make some decisions about how you want to deal with this upcoming loss of functionality.

In this report we'll cover what these changes are, how they will affect Office 365 customers, and what you can do to ensure your Unified Messaging services are not disrupted.

DISCONTINUATION OF SUPPORT FOR SESSION BORDER CONTROLLERS

On July 18, 2017 the Exchange Team at Microsoft posted an announcement on their blog that they will be ending support for Session Border Controllers connecting a third party PBX to Exchange Online. This means that Office 365 customers who have a third party on-premises PBX system using the Exchange Online Unified Messaging component will need to make a change

before July 2018 or they will lose service.

To clarify, that means if your organization is using an on-premises telephone system that isn't Skype for Business (or a previous supported version like Lync 2013) and you are using Exchange Online Unified Messaging for voicemail, you are going to need to make some changes within the next year.

This also means that customers who are currently using on-premises Exchange 2010, 2013, or 2016 as the voicemail/unified messaging solution integrated to their third party PBX will need to reconsider their path forward before they can move to Office 365.

For more details directly from Microsoft, view their [post](#) on the Exchange Team blog.

WHY IS MICROSOFT REMOVING THIS FEATURE?

It's difficult to ascribe motivation to someone, but in this case, we have enough information for an educated guess.

Office 365 is a huge service with hundreds of millions of users accessing

services every day all around the world. Microsoft is betting its entire future on this service and they want it to run as smoothly and cheaply (for Microsoft) as it can.

To provide the best quality service with the smallest possibility of support issues, Microsoft is removing third party Session Border Controllers (SBCs) from their datacenters. Simply put, Microsoft does not want to support other companies' technologies.

This is the first option that Microsoft lists, and it is clearly the choice that Microsoft wants you to use. If the Office 365 Cloud PBX solution meets your organization's needs, then by all means start the migration. Cloud PBX is still a new solution in Office 365, and many customers are not ready for that step.

Note: This option should be pursued with caution given the recent Microsoft announcements around their intentions to

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In more blunt terms, it's likely that Microsoft feels it's better to put their resources into supporting Microsoft products than to worry about supporting other companies' PBX solutions. They want everyone to use Office 365, and they want Office 365 customers to use Office 365 solutions.

WHAT ARE MY OPTIONS?

There are really four options available to current and/or future Office 365 customers who need an alternate solution to third party PBX support for Exchange Online Unified Messaging. I will outline each of the four options below, and add some commentary of my own about how this solution will affect customers' IT infrastructure.

1. Complete the migration from a third party on-premises PBX to Office 365 Cloud PBX.

replace Skype for Business Online with Microsoft Teams.

2. Complete the migration from third party on-premises PBX to Skype for Business Server Enterprise Voice on-premises.

This is another option to migrate to a completely Microsoft solution. The on-premises version of Skype for Business Server is not going away anytime soon. At this point it's safe to assume there will be at least one more on-premises version of Skype for Business Server released in the 2019 timeframe, and that version will be supported for 10 years after release.

The downside to this choice is that an on-premises deployment of Skype for Business Server with Enterprise Voice will require considerable technical skill to deploy and support. Maybe your organization is willing to

get a consultant to help with the deployment, but after that you're still going to need in-house expertise to support those servers.

3. For customers with a mixed deployment of third party PBX and Skype for Business, connect the PBX to Skype for Business Server using a connector from a Microsoft partner, and continue using Exchange Online UM through that connector.

This might seem like a complicated option, but really what this boils down to is, if your organization is using Skype

configured to replace that functionality with a much smaller investment than moving away from your existing on-premises telephone system into a Microsoft provided PBX solution.

Deploying a PBX is generally a large investment in time, money, and end-user training. Very few large organizations want to move to Cloud PBX, or even migrate to an on-premises Skype for Business PBX just because Microsoft is removing support for their current third party PBX to use Exchange Online UM for these voicemail/unified messaging features.

OFFICE 365 CUSTOMERS WILL NO LONGER BE ABLE TO DIRECTLY CONNECT THIRD PARTY PBX SYSTEMS WITH EXCHANGE ONLINE UM.

for Business and a third party PBX together, connect Skype for Business to Exchange Online Unified Messaging. In this case there are considerations for different technical configurations that would need to be discussed.

4. For customers with no Skype for Business Server deployment or for whom the solutions above are not appropriate, implement a third party voicemail/unified messaging system.

In my opinion, this is probably the best way to go for most customers who will be affected by this change.

While Exchange Online can provide a good voicemail solution, there are certainly better options that can be

WHAT FEATURES SHOULD I LOOK FOR IN A REPLACEMENT UM SOLUTION?

The major consideration when looking for a new solution to replace Exchange Online UM will be ensuring that your end-user community is comfortable with the features of the replacement solution.

The assumption is that your organization is coming from Exchange Online UM as the current solution, and you will be looking for a replacement solution that gives good feature parity.

Here is a list of some of the capabilities of Exchange Online UM that are important to look for in a replacement of Exchange Online UM:

AVST HAS A SOLUTION **DESIGNED TO FIT INTO THE HOLE LEFT BY MICROSOFT** REMOVING SUPPORT FOR THIRD PARTY SBCS CONNECTING TO EXCHANGE ONLINE UM.

- **Interoperability** - The ability to connect to existing third Party PBX systems while enabling a migration to Skype for Business in the future.

- **Cloud-based** - If your organization made the decision to move to Exchange Online UM, then you likely prefer a cloud based solution.

- **Enterprise-class Voicemail and Unified Messaging** - The heart of any UM solution is secure voicemail and unified messaging. Visual voicemail, compliance, retention, and voice prompts are all important sub-features to consider.

- **Auto-Attendants** - Many organizations rely on auto attendants for at least some of their public call flows. An efficient and well laid-out auto-attendant solution can save an organization millions of dollars in staffing and lost opportunity costs.

- **Cost effective** - Any new solution needs to fit into your budget.

- **Ease of implementation** - For a new solution to be cost effective it needs to be deployed and working in your environment for a reasonable price. A solution that costs millions of dollars to deploy is not going to be cost effective in any circumstances.

IS JULY 2018 A FIRM DATE FOR THIS FEATURE TO BE REMOVED FROM OFFICE 365?

In talking to customers about this upcoming change, we hear this question a lot so let's address it.

The best answer I can give is: "Yes?"

Microsoft has made the public announcement that this feature change is coming in July 2018, and that's the information we have to go on. Everyone can point out situations where Microsoft, and other companies, have reversed course on this sort of feature removal, but it would be irresponsible for an organization to plan on that happening here.

THE WRAP UP

Microsoft is going to remove the ability to use Exchange Online UM via a third-party PBX in July 2018. If your organization is currently relying on that Office 365 feature, then it's time to start thinking about how you will move forward.

Finding the right solution to replace this feature is going to take some time and effort.

THE AVST SOLUTION

AVST has a solution that is designed to

fit into the hole left by Microsoft removing support for a third party PBX connecting to Exchange Online UM. AVST is well-known in the industry for delivering best-of-breed Unified Messaging on the industry's most interoperable UC platform.

AVST delivers Unified Messaging to Office 365 while integrating with current and future PBX investments.

- Integrates with all leading PBX/ IP-PBX phone systems – Avaya, Cisco, Microsoft, and more
- Ability to continue using Exchange UM Outlook forms
- Enables an easy migration path from existing premise-based PBX to Skype for Business
- Economically provides an enterprise-class Unified Messaging solution

that integrates with on-premise PBXs

AVST is also a Microsoft Partner, holding Gold Communications and Messaging Competencies for CX-E. These competencies distinguish AVST as being within the top 1% of the Microsoft Partner ecosystem.

Find out more: www.AVST.com



Nathan O'Bryan is a Microsoft Certified Solutions Master: Messaging and a Microsoft MVP for Office Servers and Services from Portland, OR. He specializes in Exchange, Office 365, Active Directory, Azure and a bit of Skype for Business.