

DO YOU NEED A SERVER?

WHAT IS A SERVER?

A server is a high powered computer designed to manage, store, send and process data, 24 x 7. As such, servers need to be far more reliable than desktops or laptops. In order to achieve this, servers include things that the average personal computer does not such as:

- Processors specifically designed to handle the load servers endure such as the [Intel Xeon®](#) processor line
- Multiple processors
- Redundant hard drives and/or power supplies
- Hot swappable components - this means that repairs can be made and parts replaced without even shutting the computer down
- Scalability - servers can often be upgraded to handle more demands, programs, users, etc.
- The ability to process data faster and more efficiently than regular PCs

BENEFITS OF SERVERS

Here are some of the benefits of servers:

- File and Network security
- Increased reliability
- Remote access to programs and data
- Centralized data storage and shared resources
- Antivirus/malware management
- Centralized backup

A WORD ABOUT SERVERS

It is unlikely that a solo or small law firm needs a server today. Servers are very expensive pieces of hardware that age, wear down, and become obsolete just like a laptop or smartphone. Unlike those products, servers also run special software (including unique versions of Microsoft Windows) with settings and capabilities that most normal users, including self-proclaimed “techies,” rarely encounter and could easily misconfigure.

Apart from the substantial hardware expense, the potential for misconfiguration is the greatest hurdle or risk a firm faces. A server connected to the internet, and the attendant access privileges required, mean that a poorly configured or laxly-updated server is a potential goldmine for hackers, ransomware hunters, or just tinkering kids looking to prove their skills.

Given the prevalence of many great web-based products and services, most of what a server traditionally accomplished can be completed on a per-device basis with the use of a subscription web service. Let’s look at some examples:

FILE AND NETWORK SECURITY AND CENTRALIZED DATA STORAGE AND SHARED RESOURCES

Sync services like [Dropbox](#) or document management system vendors like [NetDocuments](#) serve this purpose. They also make document sharing easier and safer than running your own server.

You could also buy Network Attached Storage devices from a company such as [Synology](#), [Buffalo](#), or [Western Digital](#). The advantage of these NAS products is that, while they are essentially mini-servers, with all the dangers that

implies, they are also servers with guardrails or “training wheels” to prevent an amateur from doing something catastrophically unsafe. These devices’ core function is as a networked hard drive that anyone in the office can use, and can be accessed remotely over the internet, if you choose to enable that capability.

For email, there are encryption options like [Microsoft 365’s Enterprise plans](#), [Identillect’s Delivery Trust](#), or [RMail](#).

INCREASED RELIABILITY

True, servers are made with hardier components than a laptop computer. Part of that durability comes from the fact that servers don’t move or travel, unlike a laptop, smartphone, or iPad. One can’t argue that laptops are bullet-proof, either figuratively or literally, but there are cases for smartphones and tablets that can withstand rough handling or environments.

REMOTE ACCESS TO PROGRAMS AND DATA

This feature is the raison d’être of every web-based service. Those services have long since obviated the need for an on-premises server for the solo or small firm user.

If you must continue to use a server-based program, you could rent servers (aka hosted servers). Hosted servers, commonly called infrastructure as a service (IAAS), means that you pay a monthly fee to access a server via the Internet. Hosted servers also typically give you full access to all programs and data from any device connected to the Internet. IAAS is a way to “mix and match” a traditional, server-based program with the mobility of web-based software.

ANTIVIRUS/MALWARE MANAGEMENT

In addition to both Windows and macOS having some antivirus and malware features built-in, most antivirus and malware protection products do their updates to a specific device rather than “parking” an update on a server that each user’s device then requests from the local server. While such “centralized deployment” environment continue for larger firms, for solos and smalls, the management and maintenance overhead is no longer worth the gain.

CENTRALIZED BACKUP

Web-based backup services like [Carbonite](#) or [Backblaze](#), both of which offer business plans with centralized backup management, can easily replace a server-centric backup strategy. In order to have those centralizing features, you need Carbonite’s business or professional solutions, or Backblaze’s business plan.

WHEN YOU REALLY NEED A SERVER

The reality is that you can achieve file and network security, remote access, centralized data storage, antivirus/malware management and centralized backup without buying a server. If you decide to use a program that requires a server, then you don't have a choice. There are some programs that frankly won't operate at all unless they're installed on a server (older, established matter management, accounting and document/email management programs often require this).

The problem is that servers are a more profitable business than desktops or laptops for hardware companies. Beyond the physical product, server customers usually purchase highly profitable sale and post-sale assistance with installation, migration, and ongoing maintenance. As Abraham Maslow once said:

"I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail."

As indicated above, high quality alternative methods exist for achieving the benefits a server provides. But don’t feel too bad for server hardware vendors. All of the web-based services discussed above require the purchase, installation, and maintenance of thousands of servers in datacenters around the world, each one likely more expensive than any server a solo or small firm would need. Servers live on, just not in the offices of solos and small firms.