Twenty Questions to Ask an MFT Vendor

Arm Yourself with the Information to Establish the Right Technology Partnership for Your Organization

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Determine Whether a Solution Can Actually Help Your Business

As your business grows, you need an upgraded managed file transfer (MFT) system to handle the swell of digital data transactions. That development might be obvious. After all, effective data flow is what powers any modern-day organization.

But where your business turns to help deploy that MFT growth might not be so clear. In this age of seemingly endless information, it's important to know which resources can offer your company the appropriate data solutions it needs. And it's a process that can seem confusing. So, where do you begin?

You might try Googling "how to pick an MFT vendor" or "best MFT solutions" only to find a plethora of vendors. Using internet searches as the first resource is a habit that's ingrained in us, and that's fine. But you're going to get a bunch of marketing buzz and sales hype words on why that vendor's MFT solution might be better.

You might even talk among your colleagues and industry peers to get information on what they used in the past or what they currently deploy to secure and govern their business-critical file transfers. Some companies find great value in crowd-sourced sites, such as Capterra, Spiceworks, and G2. Others might just go right to a well-known analyst firm, such as Gartner and Forrester, for recommendations.

All this due diligence is completely natural and a logical start. At some point, however, you're going to have to talk to vendors and get into the weeds on how their "premier/best-in-class/industry-leading" MFT solution will support your business now and in the future. That starts with asking the right questions.

Synopsis

You owe it to your company and customers to have a firm understanding of your business data movement, especially when it comes time to explore modern managed file transfer (MFT) solutions.

Whether your company is looking for deployment on premise or in the cloud, you first need to get to know the MFT vendor and the technology to see if they mesh with your organizational needs.

This white paper offers an in-depth look at the 20 questions you should be asking vendors before moving ahead with an MFT solution.

But First, a Question for You

The first question to ask when gauging the value of an MFT solution isn't for the vendor at all. It's a question of deployment. And it isn't even the question of where you want the MFT solution deployed:

- What is the deployment of the critical applications with which your managed file transfer solution must connect and engage?

Traditionally, it's been a matter of security whether you deploy MFT on your own servers or in the cloud. More and more, however, it's the disposition of your business-critical applications that dictates how and where your MFT solution lives.

Everything is all about the application these days and how the integration layer works with these key solutions. If your applications mostly live in the cloud, does it make sense to deploy your MFT in the cloud as well? Would an on-premise MFT solution better serve your application setup?

Can on-premise MFT technology integrate with all of these SaaS applications? It's important to ask yourself, where are we as a company, and where do we need to advance?

Once you fully understand your organizational goals, you can start with your first question for the vendor:

1. What are my deployment options?
MFT vendors that don't support flexible deployment options do not embrace modern IT strategies, so it's critical an MFT solution can be launched on-premise, in the cloud, or both. Once you establish your business needs based on some internal soul-searching, you can start asking the types of follow-up questions that our prospects need answered before deciding to become a happy Cleo customer. Some of these questions (and answers) will have overlapping implications for any deployment scenario, but these should be a strong starting point in getting to know a potential MFT vendor and its capabilities.

Follow-up Questions for the On-Premise Crowd

If you are considering an on-premise MFT deployment, a potential vendor must be able to clearly answer these questions:

2. Can your MFT technology run on my current operating system?

This is a very common first question as many vendors only tend to support a few operating systems and some only one(!). It's a great question. If switching the OS isn't an option for your organization, the conversation might be over before it can even start. If you're dealing with a truly leading MFT vendor, it won't make you switch as it will likely support deployment on Windows, UNIX, Linux, IBM iSeries, and other common operating systems.

3. What is the solution footprint?

It's important that your MFT solution doesn't take over system and network resources. The point of MFT is to be an agile technology that runs smoothly in the background. Many vendors provide a lightweight web portal. Some vendors even offer a hybrid high-availability/disaster recovery configuration, where nodes sit in different data centers and can accept connections independently of each other. This configuration is growing in popularity as it greatly reduces the MFT footprint, but not all vendors can offer it.

4. Will it scale?

Scalability ranks as one of the most critical components of modern MFT systems. The incumbent solution's inability to scale tends to be a primary reason organizations search MFT solutions in the first place. With the amount of time, money, and resources organizations allocate for MFT technology, it's critical that it can support your future needs and grow as your business grows. Adding new trading partners, creating new maps, and integrating new applications should take days or weeks, not months.

5. Do you offer high availability?

Not to be confused with disaster recovery, a high-availability MFT solution ensures 24/7 access to data and systems. A high-availability setup (in an Active:Active or Active:Passive configuration) relies on two or more nodes that can handle requests simultaneously. In the event of a node failure, the other node(s) can seamlessly pick up the payloads to ensure business continuity. Eliminating downtime is crucial for any company in today's "always-on" digital ecosystem, but high availability is especially critical if you're a cloud-based service company, where your customers rely on your organization for 100% uptime so they can serve their own customers without interruption.

6. Can I deploy a proxy server?

With data breaches making headlines daily, security is of the utmost importance to companies across industries. A modern MFT solution will offer a forward/reverse proxy server in the DMZ that acts as an intermediary between the MFT server on the internal network and the connecting partner. If the proxy server were to be hacked or hit with malicious software, no sensitive data would be at risk and the attack could not penetrate your firewall.

7. What is your API story?

Companies of all sizes are rediscovering the power of MFT and are looking to deliver new offerings for customers. That's why modern MFT vendors must be able to:
- Publish APIs to extend their capabilities to build custom integrations
- Consume APIs to integrate the enterprise service bus (ESB) and essential applications

Companies leveraging RESTful API interactions can extend an on-premise solution to work with cloud and SaaS applications by embedding the most powerful B2B functionalities by orchestrating MFT services into the process to create greater services for your business and customers.

8. What kind of support and services are offered?

Software support isn't sexy, but it's a basic requirement nowadays. Companies can't have unsupported MFT software managing their business-critical data flows. Vendors should offer flexible, affordable support from a highly skilled team that understands the solution from all angles.

Additionally, you should be assured knowing that a highly capable professional services team can jump in and assist with the more complex aspects of solution deployment. Vendors should allow customers to choose the level of assistance they want, whether that's high-level guidance, end-to-end implementation, data mapping, or migration help.

9. What do you offer in terms of certificate management?

Having to manually update digital certificates between trading partners becomes impossible as your company scales. Imagine a company like Walmart, with more than 11,000 suppliers, operating without automated certificate management. It'd take an entire separate wing of the company just to manage the certificates. A native certificate manager within your MFT solution facilitates:
- Generating self-signed user certificates and certificate signing requests (CSRs)
- Importing and exporting user certificates and private keys
- Importing and exporting certificate authority (CA) certificates
- Marking CA certificates as trusted or pending

Follow-up Questions for the Cloud Crowd

If it's in your organization's best interest to deploy in the cloud, ask:

10. What kind of visibility do I get?

"Knowing is the best part." That's a quote from a longtime Cleo customer who understands that organizations that thrive on knowing how their data is moving internally and externally thrive at their business. Dashboards and monitoring for all system-, application-, and people-centric file transfers must be available from a single source of integrated truth so you can keep an omniscient eye on all business data exchanges. That way, you will know when to act before small transactional issues become a business-wide problem.

And considering that you're choosing to deploy your MFT in the cloud and possibly have that vendor manage it for you, it's important to know that you'll still have transparency into those data flows.

11. What support do you offer for SLAs and KPIs?

Maintaining good standing with customers and trading partners is yet another form of compliance companies must consider. Service-level agreements (SLAs) and key performance indicators (KPIs) are mutually agreed-upon requirements that specifically measure how your business performs in relation to that party.

MFT software should enable the timely, reliable flow of your business file transfers to meet trading deadlines, efficiency goals, and reconciliation and conflict resolution scenarios mandated by SLAs and KPIs. Strong MFT functionality helps your company avoid penalties, chargebacks, and, perhaps worse, reputational damage due to poor performance.

12. What kinds of certifications do you have?

Certified MFT software means it's been put through the testing ringer and successfully stood up to various file transfer tasks. Ask about whether a specific vendor has certification credentials required by your business. Some popular ones include:
- Drummond Group certification for AS2, AS3, and ebXML interoperability
- FIPS 140-2 certified data encryption to work with the government agencies and firms working in the government sector
- OFTP2 certification for the automotive industry
- Connectors for popular SaaS applications, including Salesforce and NetSuite
- Connectors for Amazon S3, Hadoop and other big data technologies

13. Do I need to pay extra to use different communications protocols to support a wide variety of trading partners?

The answer should always be no. Protocol flexibility becomes increasingly important as your network of trading partners and customers grows. Saying yes to new business could cost you additional money. A modern MFT vendor supports a deep stack of protocols – beyond just AS2, FTPs, and HTTPs – so you can quickly connect to any new trading partner.

Furthermore, modern MFT solutions are built to interface with various endpoints, and an increasing number of MFT vendors offer interfaces to popular cloud storage sites. Supporting such a wide variety of protocols also makes your organization easier to do business with. Your customers will also appreciate that in the form of referrals and testimonials.

14. How fast can I onboard partners and achiever a faster time to revenue?

Quickly connecting to new trading partners plagues so many companies, and it's one of the biggest reasons our customers leave other vendors for Cleo. New revenue is driven by a deep protocol stack, an intuitive user interface, and citizen integrator capabilities that agilely unlock business value. Ask your vendor for metrics (if available) and customer references on how easy it is to onboard new partners. A vendor can promise quick connectivity, but a vendor's customers can verify if that promise holds up.

Get to Know the Vendor, Technology

Once you've figured out the deployment framework, you can dive deeper into the functionality of the actual MFT solution:

15. Will this enable compliance for my organization?

Companies in heavily regulated industries face lofty fines if they don't take appropriate measures to protect data at rest and in motion. But compliance extends across industries. Some of the most common data protection legislation includes:

- Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) for healthcare
- Sarbanes-Oxley Act (SOX) for financial services
- Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard (PCI DSS) for retail and any other industry that handles cardholder data
- General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) for data safeguards in the European Union

Consider this 2017 study by the Ponemon Institute: With tabs for the average data breach topping $3.5 million, it's critical your MFT solutions enable your data workflows to comply with government and industry regulations.

16. Is there comprehensive audit functionality?

A full audit trail of a file's life cycle is required to maintain government and industry compliance and often to meet SLAs and KPIs. A must-have for many organizations, leading MFT solutions eliminate the manual data fetches for auditing/reporting and automate the tracking process so you know every aspect – when it was sent and received, who touched it and when – in case of an audit.

17. What is non-repudiation, and do I need it?

Non-repudiation is proof that what was sent by a certain system or person was actually received by another system or person, and that it is indeed the same file. This ensures integrity of the document. MFT solutions do this via digital signatures in combination with cryptographic data hash functions, such as the SHA-1 and SHA-2 algorithms. While required in many industries, including healthcare, banking, insurance, and securities, non-repudiation capabilities are critical to knowing your data sets are authentic and will benefit every organization doing digital business.

18. Does this solution offer a large file transfer protocol to manage increasing file sizes?

While file volumes are ever-increasing in the current era of digital transformation, the individual file sizes within those flows also are increasing. High-speed file transfer isn't an option anymore – it's essential. Large files are bogging down networks and slowing business operations.

Ask the vendor directly: Will I need to continue to copy these massive files to a hard drive and ship it overnight, or can you greatly simplify my life in the form of an accelerated digital file transfer protocol? The answer might surprise you.

19. Is there a native ad hoc file sharing capability?

Leading MFT platforms support all manner of data sharing, including the one-off emails and person-to-person collaboration required to complete daily tasks. Too many business users download non-sanctioned, consumer-grade file sharing solutions, and this "shadow IT" poses visibility and auditing threats. Robust MFT solutions feature built-in file sharing technology that support the easy exchange of any file type or size from the desktop or on the move.

Ask the vendor directly: Do you have an easy-to-use tool I can offer my employees before they go rogue and start sharing proprietary company data through unsecured solutions?

20. Am I locked into a certain kind of pricing model?

There are benefits to both subscription licensing and perpetual licensing, but an MFT vendor must offer you the flexibility that fits your business.

Perpetual licensing means you buy the license outright and can use the solution as long as you need it. While this model can be less costly in the long run, it usually requires a capital expense (capex) approval and can be harder to come by. Also, software upgrades tend to be excluded or offered only as part of a support package.

Subscription models are priced to fit into IT departmental budgets and can be considered operational expenses (opex) for faster approval. Subscription-based MFT customers also can better forecast costs and receive automatic updates.

Summary

You can sit back and listen to managed file transfer vendors tell you everything they think you should know about MFT and how it will help your business. The truth is, though, you are the one who truly knows your organization.

Once you determine your own deployment needs, asking the right questions will open a two-way dialogue and put you on a faster, more productive path to solving the data needs of your company. And that's what you're truly after. Your vendor must ask you the right questions to get to know and understand your business. It's up to you to do the same of your MFT vendor. By merely exploring modern MFT solutions, you are taking control of your business data movement.

Now take control of finding the right technology to fully deliver that data movement for your growing organization.

About the Author

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A former Gartner MFT analyst and current market evangelist and strategy director, Frank Kenney is widely credited as the creator of the term "MFT" and was the first to write about and discuss its modern architecture, platform, and use cases. Previously, Frank was the vice president of global strategy and product management at Ipswitch, responsible for aligning the company's vision and strategy with its products, services, and messaging. He also served more than 10 years as a research director at Gartner, where he defined the managed file transfer, B2B gateway, SOA governance, and cloud service brokerage markets. Before joining Cleo, Frank was an independent IT consultant helping technology providers create, validate, and implement a variety of business strategies. He holds a degree in music technology from the Center for the Media Arts, is certified in digital multimedia and instructional technologies and studied English and computer science at the University of Tampa.