RentalPoint and Small Business Server

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Small Business Server Technical Issues

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Microsoft Small Business Server has many problems when used as the server in a RentalPoint system. This article outlines the causes and corrections for these issues.

Microsoft Small Business Server 2011 Errata:

What is Small Business Server?

This single product packages Windows Server 2008 R2, Exchange Server 2010, Windows Software Update Server, Microsoft SMS powered desktop health and security management, integrated Backup and other Microsoft technology, in one swiss-army-knife product. The theory when released was that it would be easier to administer than a dozen separate systems, and provide most of the high end functionality that Microsoft server system customers would deploy on half a dozen machines, all on one machine.

This article covers problems Commonly Encountered when using Small Business Server 2011. The replacement product (Windows Server Essentials 2012) has fewer of these issues, but has not yet been tested properly with RentalPoint.

SQL Deployment Issues

Microsoft has deployed multiple SQL instances in Small Business Server, and this situation creates a more complex environment for installing the SQL Instance used by RentalPoint itself. While the initial installation of SQL

Express may appear to go smoothly, SQL Express itself has not been designed out of the box to work in such a complex environment, and also has not been correctly designed to report to users the nature of its problems, or to work properly as a workgroup database server instance in such an instance. It can be configured to work, but in the end, the result has been that many hours of time have been spent by users attempting to get a system working, and unless the person deploying and installing the SQL instance is of exceptional technical skill, it is very likely that they will become trapped by the twin inadequacies and technical flaws of SQL Express and Small Business server. Remediation in this case requires deep technical knowledge of SQL Instance configuration (TCP/IP Static and Dynamic properties) and requires that the deployment/install person understand the correct operation and configuration of a multi-instance system, using Dynamic TCP/IP Ports, and the Microsoft SQL Browser service.

Runtime Performance Issues

Microsoft Small Business Server is a good deal from the point of view that it contains a half dozen large, expensive and difficult to configure server-tier applications, including an at-a-glance-Desktop and Server Management component to tell you what computers on your network require IT attention, Windows Software Update Services (WSUS), and dozens more services. When you boot this system on a moderately powerful server-class computer (A typical midrange Intel Xeon from Dell purchased in 2012), the system may take 8 to 12 minutes to boot to a login screen, and over 20 minutes to reach a desktop. If you open the performance monitor you will see thousands of threads, hundreds of processes, and thrashing of the system, all before RentalPoint software is even installed on this "empty" machine that is "not yet used for anything" that the customer wishes to use it for. In short, this machine's resources are totally consumed by Microsoft's default software load-out. Indeed, it is downloading 200 gigabytes of Windows Updates to cache them locally, it is operating servers for Microsoft Exchange, and SMS, and the SQL instances that both of those services use. The number one performance problem on SBS is that SMS and WSUS can consume 100% of the computer's disk bandwidth, even with no users logged into the system.

Remediating this performance issue is difficult, and Microsoft's decision to retire and discontinue the product may be be an indicator of how intractable Microsoft found fixing SBS's shortcomings to be, but we have found it is extremely effective to simply disable the desktop-management (SMS) and windows-update (WSUS) server, and return to a non-SMS non-WSUS small business environment. Managing WSUS in a small office is not worth the hassle, nor does SMS provide any real benefits to most small businesses. Both these systems are more of a source of pain, than a source of help to most small businesses.

RentalPoint Server Service Incompatabilities

The System account, as configured in SBS is not suitable for operation with RentalPoint Server Service, which normally runs from the NT SYSTEM Service security context. The workaround is to configure a special user account (call it RPSERVERSERVICE for standardization) , create a password, add that user to the SQL authentication groups and Windows domain groups that it requires access to, so it can read the C:\RentalPointV10 folder and other RentalPoint data, and so it can access the SQL instance that you have created for RentalPoint use. Now configure the Service using Windows "Manage Computer" window, go to the Services Icon, expand it and locate the RentalPointService, right click, and click properties. Go to the second tab, called Security and change the security from System to your own account, enter RPSERVERSERVICE (or whatever account name you created) and the password you created. Note that the password should be complex and hard to guess, and that you do not really need to memorize it or remember it permanently, you simply need to create it, and input it correctly into the Service configuration. In fact, for such purposes it is better to generate a long random password, input it, and then make sure it works, and then forget it. If you ever need to reconfigure it, log in as administrator, and regenerate a new random password for this service.