

SOFTWARE AS A SERVICE: WHAT IT IS AND HOW IT CAN MAKE YOU HAPPY

SAVE YOUR FIRM A TON OF MONEY, OVERTIME, EXCESS PERSONNEL AND THOSE BIG HASSLES AND HEADACHES.

Have you ever used GMail, Facebook, or Amazon? If you have, then you've more than just visited a web site, you've accessed a web application.

Web applications do a lot more than just web sites - they store information, help you perform work, and allow you to interact with other people, all via a web browser.

They differ from traditional desktop applications which are downloaded from the Internet or installed via a CD. Web applications are also known in the general business community as Software as a Service, or SaaS.

An increasing number of software developers are writing business applications as SaaS applications, allowing you, the consumer, to perform all of your office functions without installing any software. In the legal industry, new programs exist as alternatives to traditional packages such as PC Law or Time Matters. With these offerings, you don't need to go through the complicated process of installing networks of clients and servers. Instead, simply open a browser such as Internet Explorer, Firefox, or Safari, and you're up and running.

SaaS can make your work life substantially easier and remove common business headaches. It's one step closer to computing zen because it eliminates hassles that most people assume they simply had to put up with. Here's a list of reasons why SaaS can contribute to office nirvana:

YOU HAVE FEWER COMPUTERS AND DEVICES TO WORRY ABOUT

If you buy traditional legal practice management software, you need to spend considerable cash on a slew of different components. You'll purchase servers and backup machines, VPN's and other security devices. Pretty soon, you will end up with server closets and something called "infrastructure". You'll have to devote time and energy to manage your infrastructure or employ an IT professional.

With SaaS, your infrastructure evaporates. You don't need a server closet, and nor to figure out which component has broken when your software crashes. All you need are computers connected to the Internet and a web browser.

YOU HAVE NO UPGRADES TO WORRY ABOUT

When you install traditional software, life expectancy is an issue: at some point, your software or hardware becomes obsolete and you or your IT consultant will need to update your software. If you ever need to upgrade your computer, you'll have to install the software all over again.

Web application providers continually update their software for you, so you never have to worry about upgrades, their expense, possible downtime and what could potentially happen to your data during such a transition. If you upgrade your hardware, all you have to do is launch your browser. You're good to go.

YOU HAVE LESS INITIAL OVERHEAD

Traditional software is sold with licenses requiring a sizable upfront investment plus smaller annual maintenance fees. You'll also need to purchase servers, backup components, security systems and the human resources needed to install and manage those systems. Some cost estimates put the first year of ownership for an installed legal system for a small firm upwards of \$8,000.00.

Instead of requiring licenses, SaaS providers typically charge a monthly fee. This makes your technology budget more predictable. Having monthly fees means you're avoiding a large initial overhead, often a barrier to small firms investing in technology.

YOU HAVE A GREATER PEACE OF MIND

When you manage your own computers and data, you are responsible for backups and security. Physical removal of data is much more of a danger than international cyber-criminals. Think of the people who have access to your valuable equipment and information including, for example, your cleaning staff and landlord. Managing security means maintaining up-to-date server patches and correctly configured VPN networks. As the recent Cornficker worm proved, some 30% of Windows servers were vulnerable because their security patches weren't applied.

Responsible SaaS providers run continuous backups, often in multiple geographic locations, to ensure the redundancy of your data. Servers are also continually patched with the latest critical vulnerability fixes, residing in fortress-like restricted facilities



monitored by security teams. Most SaaS applications run over encrypted channels, similar to online banking services or common online shopping cart applications.

YOU CAN USE MACS, WINDOWS, LINUX, OR ANY COMBINATION OF THE THREE

One of the major forces that has always shackled users to Windows machines has been the lack of software for alternative operating systems such as Linux or Macs. This is especially the case with business specific software including products made for the legal industry.

When software runs on the web, it's accessible on any machine with Internet access. Suddenly, Macs and Linux machines enjoy the same dedicated business functionality that Windows has for so many years. In addition, mobile devices, such as the iPhone, Blackberry, or Windows Pocket PC feature robust browsers, allowing access to your information from anywhere at anytime.

YOU HELP THE ENVIRONMENT

Computers require a lot electricity. In law firms, the traditional setup of client-server systems causes tremendous waste in terms of hardware components and electricity consumption.

By some estimates, most companies use only 10% of their computing capacity: all of the extra machines and power goes unused. Machines have to be disposed of every three to five years, adding heaps of plastic, metal, and silicon to the nation's landfills.

An efficient SaaS provider can supply the computing needs of hundreds of customers with a single computer. By using web software, you help reduce your carbon footprint as well as your contribution to landfills.

CONCLUSION

If you're a lawyer or an administrator in a law firm, the value of SaaS over installed software is that you don't have to manage or pay someone to manage your IT infrastructure. You outsource your technology, and at the same time rid yourself of the hassles and headaches that go along with it.

By Larry Port

“All you need are computers connected to the Internet and a web browser.”