BY LARRY PORT

going
green:

How Software as a Service Helps the Environment

Like many other businesses worldwide, law firms are listening to their environmental consciences and instituting energy-saving policies, recycling programs, paper reduction initiatives, and other Earth-friendly efforts.

By pursuing such initiatives, companies are not only acting in a socially responsible manner, but they are also cutting expenses and improving their bottom lines. For example, going paperless (or close to it) means less money spent on purchasing, storing, and destroying paper, and using less electricity reduces carbon emissions and utility costs. Turning off a desktop computer during non-work hours, for instance, can save at least 821 kilowatt hours a year, eliminating 1,100 pounds of greenhouse emissions per machine. And replacing a desktop and monitor with a laptop can reduce electricity consumption by two-thirds.

So, what if firms could eliminate the need for computers, monitors, and backup devices running in their "server closets?" The positive effects on the environment would be substantial, especially if it were a sweeping, industry-wide transformation. In addition, cost savings related to hardware, software, and tech support would be considerable.

Fortunately, this is no longer a hypothetical exercise, thanks to modern legal applications known as Software as a Service (SaaS, pronounced "sass"). Because a SaaS application runs in a Web browser, there's no need to install software or hardware at the office, aside from the workstation itself. Instead of launching an application, an attorney, legal manager or other firm professional can navigate to a Web site, log in with a username and password, and interact with the application as he or she would with an online mail program (such as Hotmail) or online banking. Because SaaS is a Web-based technology, the data are stored in high-security, ultra-modern data centers. Such centers are better equipped to handle high-powered computers than are most law offices, with round-the-clock surveillance systems, secured access to machines, redundant power supplies, backup generators, multiple Internet connections, and fortress-like construction to protect against the worst disasters.

Using a SaaS application frees a law firm of having to maintain its legal software, because typical procedures such as installs, upgrades, and security patches are outsourced to the SaaS provider. Law office managers now have an abundance of options to run a practice with SaaS, with Web-based solutions exist for billing, matter management, contact relationship managers, calendars, backups, electronic data discovery, and more.

Using a SaaS solution instead of traditional, server-installed software has several environmental benefits, including fewer old computers disposed of in landfills and reduced electricity consumption and release of greenhouse gases. Most computers use only fractions of their capacities, so the energy required to run them is mostly going to waste. A well-designed SaaS application can accommodate, on one set of three computers, the computing needs of about 300 firms. So, if each one of those 300 firms replaced one server (i.e., an application server) with an outsourced SaaS solution, 297 computers could be eliminated, along with more than a half-million pounds of CO_2 emissions. If these firms eliminated additional backup servers as well, more than 1 million pounds of greenhouse gas would never enter the atmosphere, and hundreds of outdated workstations would not end up in landfills.

Environmentally friendly efficiency is another big benefit of SaaS. When you're using a SaaS solution, your software is available via a Web browser, which means you can access firm software from any computer with Internet access. This allows people to work from home easily, boosting employee morale and reducing the amount of toxins in the environment attributable to commuters in cars.

And don't forget: There's also the public perception of any an altruistic initiative. It can't hurt your firm's reputation to be seen as "doing the right thing" when it comes to the environment, and SaaS may help you and your firm to achieve those goals.

about the author

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