

Is your internet connection keeping pace?

Cloud applications offer flexibility and give SMEs access to the type of applications previously only available to large businesses. However, companies that do not upgrade their internet connection could be left struggling, Sean Hargrave finds out.

► **The way companies of all sizes conduct their business is fundamentally changing, bringing with it a pressing need for an internet connection with more speed and resilience than ever before.**



"We carried out some research recently that showed that nearly half of SMEs are likely to use cloud services within the next five years and so their ability to run will be directly linked to the quality of their internet connection."

Chris Stening

Traditionally the software and applications an organisation relied on for its day to day running were stored, maintained and updated from within the office. This meant that a powerful network could deliver internal data and so there was less pressure on a company's link to the outside world to evolve at speed. Hence connections to the net improved at a relatively gentle pace throughout the nineties and noughties from the dial up modem, to broadband and then symmetrical broadband (which provides equal speeds for incoming and outgoing traffic) and, most recently, bonded symmetrical broadband, which combines two lines or more in one connection.

Of course, the problem with keeping applications inside a company's server room and distributing them on an internal network has always been a lack of flexibility, limiting how companies can utilise the data they hold and what they can do with it. To remain productive wherever they are, employees need to have access to applications whenever they are online so they can use the latest tools, such as CRM, billing systems and sales programmes, to name just a few.

At the same time, the cost of constantly updating software and applications – in terms of IT staff and unwelcome network down time – has meant many companies are now switching to what is known as Software as a Service (SaaS). Rather than update and maintain applications themselves on their own servers, it is done for them and staff access the latest version of the application over the Net.

Cloud speed

These latest developments of offering applications and software services online is referred to as 'cloud' computing and means that a company's communications connections are more important than ever. With so much activity being carried out across the web, whether staff are in the office or not, a company's internet connection needs to be faster and more reliable than ever before.

Hence, the Managing Director of Easynet Connect, Chris Stening believes there will be plenty of demand for the company's new 100Mbps fibre connections launched mid January (initially within the M25 area). The connections cost £15k per year, and £5k to install and Stening insists this compares well against existing offers. He believes there is pent up demand for an 'uncontended' fibre to the premises (FTTP) service which, as the name suggests, is not shared

with any other customers and takes the fibre connection right in to the premises, not a junction box at the end of the street.

"There are a lot of companies out there paying an awful lot more for leased lines and not getting anything like 100Mbps," he suggests.

"There's huge demand among businesses for a faster, more resilient connection to the Net and so I think that for many, our 100Mb connection will provide a very attractive package."

History lesson

For any business person who thinks that 100Mbps may be more than they could possibly need, Stening fondly remembers the days earlier in his career when he launched an 8Mbps service. At the time, most SMEs were on 128k ISDN lines or 256kb leased lines and so people openly questioned whether businesses would need such speed which, today, may seem rather pedestrian.

History, he suggests, shows that as we do more and more online, so our need for faster connections becomes more pressing.

"As you look back, businesses have always needed to move up to faster, more resilient connections," he says.

"There's still a lot companies can do with copper wire services which, when several lines are combined, can provide 40Mbps, but I'm convinced that many businesses need to go beyond that.

"Businesses are facing a real pain point today. They're doing more and more online, particularly as the cloud takes off and they're running business applications over the Net including their email if they run something like Microsoft Hosted Exchange. A lot of companies are also routing their phone system through their internet connection and as video and audio moves to high definition, they are sending and receiving more data than ever. It means their existing infrastructure is in danger of slowing down and struggling to cope, so I'm very confident that fibre is the future."

In fact, Stening makes the point that the beauty of fibre is that it can be upgraded at a later stage. Even though today people may think 100Mbps is faster than they need, future requirements may well demand even faster connections which could be provided over the same fibre connection and switch. One day we could even be talking about connections in gigabits as standard, rather than megabits, he suggests.

Reliability key

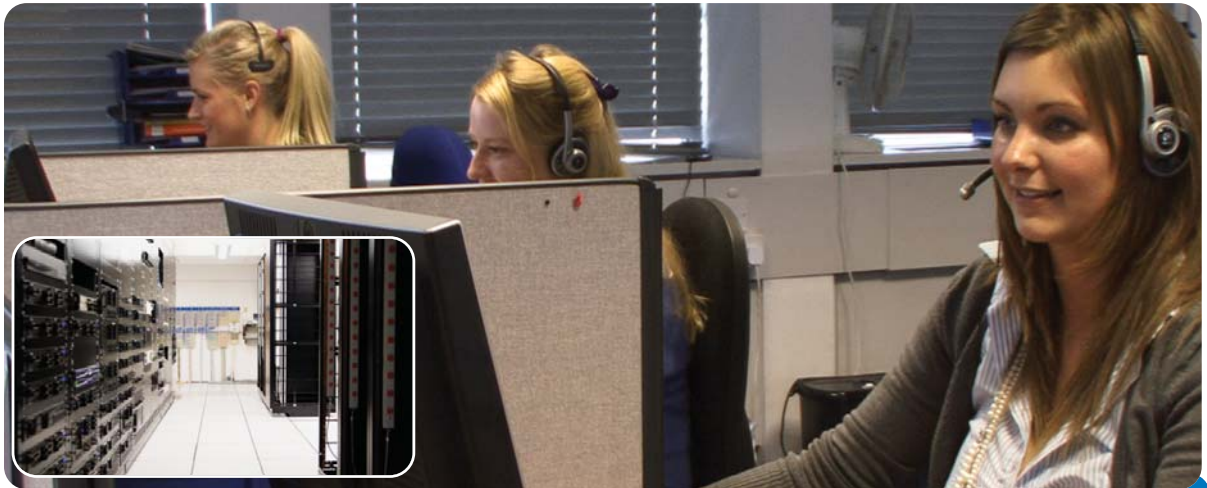
However, speed is one thing and just as a broken down Ferrari is slower than a bicycle, an internet connection is only as good as the reliability its provider can offer.

"Voice over internet introduces a lot of companies to the need to consider prioritising certain types of traffic."

Chris Stening

"There seems to be a misconception among businesses that a poor service is something you just put up with because changing supplier is too problematic. The truth is it's actually a very simple process."

Chris Stening



To prove the point, Easynet Connect researched SMEs' reaction to losing their internet connection and found that a quarter would definitely need an outage fixed within an hour and nearly three in four (71%) revealed their business would grind to a halt if the connection were not fixed within a day.

"The way businesses use the internet for all manner of applications means it's more crucial than ever that they stay connected," says Stening.

"The web has opened up new markets for small and medium businesses and allowed them to punch above their weight but new services need them to re-examine their internet connectivity to ensure they maintain these advantages moving forward."

Chris Stening

"It's not just a case of staff not being able to browse the web, businesses simply can't afford to be unconnected today because email would grind to a halt, their website might come down, they wouldn't be able to take or process any orders and all the applications they're running in the cloud wouldn't work.

"Quite simply, modern businesses cannot do business without their internet connection and that's why it's important that a provider is reputable and has its own extensive fibre infrastructure. You also need a provider who can give you two connections on two separate networks, if required, so if one were to suffer an outage the other would instantly kick in. And, just as importantly, make sure your operator can fix issues quickly. We, for example, have a 95% first time fix rate."

With modern business moving from communicating online to actually running a company's applications online, Stening maintains that it is more important than ever for companies to re-evaluate their internet connection.

About Easynet Connect

Easynet Connect is a leading provider of quality connectivity and internet access for small to medium size businesses.

Established in 1994 and part of BSkyB Group, Easynet Connect is one of the largest networks in the UK with 6030km of fibre and last mile access to more than 70% of UK businesses via a network of more than 1,200 unbundled exchanges.

Easynet Connect is the first ISP to launch a reliable fixed-rate 100 Mbps fibre service across London, as well as being the first in the UK to have provided DSL services over an unbundled local loop and has pioneered managed LLU services for business.

We offer a range of uncontended symmetrical speeds up to 1Gbps, all backed by 24x7 UK-based network monitoring and customer support, 99.9% Service Level Guarantees and an enviable 95% First Time Fix rate.

For more information visit www.easynetconnect.net or call 0800 053 1777

Are you being served?

The increasing reliance on a fast, robust internet connection makes it essential that a business chooses not only one with the right speed but also one which is backed up by a reputable supplier who readily steps in when the 'what if' scenarios happen and connectivity is lost.

The problem is, other than word of mouth, there really is no common system for comparing suppliers. Hence, although Easynet quotes its figure of a 95% 'first time fix' rate, the business ISP believes potential customers would be best informed if they could compare commonly agreed metrics for service levels.

Many companies from a wide range of industries already use the Net Promoter Score system which, as the name suggests, gives businesses a score on how likely their customers are to recommend that service supplier to other customers.

As Harry Eastman, Operations Director at Easynet Connect, points out, how customers rate a service provider is a very valuable means of comparing rival offers from competing telecommunications brands.

"Businesses already have access to fairly detailed technical data when choosing their ISP, but information on the levels of customer service can be patchy," he says.

"While the technical data is still important in the buying process, only feedback from customers themselves can tell you what it is really like to rely on their services day in, day out.

Certainly Easynet Connect's Managing Director, Chris Stening, believes telecommunications companies should start to allow a third party to collate their NPS ratings internally so they can compare one another's results and then, at a later stage, publish the figures.

"It would definitely need a trusted third party, such as the Communications Management Association, to collate the results so we could all see how we're doing against one another," he says.

"Ultimately, we'd then want to see that move forward to public disclosure so businesses could look at our NPS rating and compare it and then make an informed decision. There are always going to be rock bottom priced offers available to companies but they're not silly, they know that the real question is what happens if things go wrong. They know they can't be without their internet connection for any length of time, so companies need to know how each ISP is rated by its customers so they can make an informed decision."

