



## Every Cloud has a Silver Lining

Chris Stening, MD, Easynet Connect on what businesses must do to benefit from cloud computing

Cloud computing has been a hot topic amongst technology professionals for many years now. Technologists, software developers and futurologists have long argued over its future, and how, or more importantly when, it will become the mainstream replacement for traditional installed applications. When thinking of cloud computing, companies like Google, Salesforce.com and Amazon immediately spring to mind as early innovators, with applications like Google's Gmail and Amazon's EC2 successfully demonstrating the viability of the concept. But with the software behemoth Microsoft recently entering the race with the announcement of its Azure platform, cloud computing could soon be entering its perfect storm, reaching the critical mass of mainstream adoption. But what impact will this shift have on small and medium businesses in the UK?

Firstly, what is cloud computing? The actual 'cloud' reference derives from the symbol used to depict the internet in computer network diagrams, and 'cloud computing' is essentially the model of delivering IT-related capabilities as a *service* via the internet, as opposed to being *installed* within a company's offices on servers or PC hard drives. Cloud computing is closely associated with software-as-a-service or 'SaaS'. The terms are often used interchangeably, but there is a key difference; SaaS refers specifically to the delivery of just IT *software* within the cloud, distinguishing it from other IT services such as hosting or storage (all of which can be delivered via the cloud).

Recent research by Easynet Connect<sup>1</sup> shows that UK SMBs are increasingly eager to adopt cloud computing, with 47% planning to do so within the next five years. With Microsoft now entering the game, this number is likely to increase as awareness grows. So why are SMBs interested?

35% of those planning a move to cloud computing cited cost savings as the key driver, however there are many other benefits to consider beyond just cost. Cloud computing does away with the complexities of managing a software portfolio, since numerous packages no longer need to be laboriously installed and set up on every machine in the organisation - instead software is upgraded automatically within 'the cloud'. Gone are the days of sitting down to get on with your

work, only to be interrupted by yet another unscheduled software update. Having software immediately available in the cloud also significantly reduces the time to set up additional systems, allowing more capacity to be added seamlessly without the need to enlist expensive IT support services.

Discs, documentation and licences no longer need to be stored and kept up-to-date, and as cloud services work on any platform with a web browser, compatibility issues of running an office on different systems are eliminated. When these factors combine, cloud computing significantly reduces maintenance headaches and saves time, ultimately freeing the organisation's IT specialists to focus on more strategic tasks. This is particularly attractive to SMBs whose IT support functions are usually small and under pressure to complete a multitude of tasks.

So what must SMBs do to fully reap the benefits of cloud computing? Crucially, if you plan to move your critical business systems over to the cloud, you must ensure you can always access them. Recent research showed that 71% of UK businesses today could not survive more than a day without their internet connection, yet our own research shows that only 10-13% of SMBs have considered improving their security, business continuity or Internet access measures as they move to the cloud. There is no escaping the fact that once the cloud becomes the home of your most critical business applications, fast, reliable and secure Internet access becomes absolutely essential.

In addition to the reliability of your internet connection, cloud computing places new requirements on speed, in particular *upload* speed. Cloud computing requires you to upload as much, if not more, information than you download. For example Google Docs, a typical cloud computing application, must upload to the internet with every key stroke. While you may not notice any significant difference with a single user, a slow upload speed becomes apparent once everyone replaces their installed word processor with a Google Docs application. Currently, some SMBs use ADSL internet connections which are built primarily for downloading. SDSL by contrast is the obvious choice for cloud computing, as it offers equal upload to download speeds.

Cloud computing is likely to radically change the way SMBs use the Internet. Reduced costs and greater simplicity are real draws, but the added risks of such an operational change must be met with the right attitude to the increased importance of their internet connection to their business. SMBs must take steps to ensure this cloud has nothing but a silver lining.

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<sup>i</sup> Outlook cloudy as SMBs not ready for hosted apps, *Easynet Connect and OpinionMatters*, Autumn 2008