

Cloud computing can empower SA entrepreneurs

Small businesses that use more than two types of cloud services grow 26% faster and are 21% more profitable on average than those that don't use cloud tools, according to a new report from Google and Deloitte that surveyed over 1300 IT decision makers in six countries, including the US, the UK, France, Spain, Italy and The Netherlands. South African business owners and entrepreneurs should learn from the results of this survey and utilise cloud computing to their advantage.



This is according to Athol Wesselink, chief engineer of OpenWeb, a nationwide internet service provider (ISP), who said that the use of cloud computing makes it more affordable for start-up businesses or Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) to establish a small office or to work from home. "Users can benefit from several technologies, cut costs and focus on their core business instead of being impeded by IT obstacles."

Wesselink said that the use of a cloud computing is beneficial to start-ups and SMMEs because the system mitigates the need to purchase expensive servers on site. "Cloud computing utilises large groups of remote server farms that are networked to allow the sharing of data-processing tasks, centralised data storage, as well as the provision of online access to computer services."

By hosting a cloud server with an ISP, SMMEs can dramatically reduce the expense of expensive capital hardware items and the associated software, he said. "On top of the expense and risk of hosting your server on site, it is often a data compliance audit requirement to back data up with a third party, such as an information and records management partner. Alternatively, using cloud computing services, the ISP can host a secure cloud server for the business at as little as R360 per month and the responsibility of maintaining these servers fall on the ISP itself."

A snapshot-back-up system

When using cloud servers, the data is stored in secure server farms, which are usually supported by trusted brands such as Microsoft and Apple, minimising the risk for business owners, explained Wesselink. "The server farms are also supported by load balancers and firewalls, as well as a snapshot-back-up system, which means the state of a system at a particular point in time is continuously duplicated and stored. The only security responsibility that falls on the business owner is the implementation and maintenance of strong alpha-numeric passwords and running of regular updates on anti-virus software."

He said that it is good housekeeping for companies to update passwords regularly to minimise the chances of a data hack, though most cloud servers are fairly robust - running on unix operating systems - and are, thus, less susceptible to intrusion. "It is only machines that have holes in the code (exploits) and that do not run the latest security that can be taken over by hackers for criminal activity, such as spam or data capturing, though the regular use of the snapshot-back-up system renders the loss of data virtually impossible."

While cloud technology can be used for several functions, such as real-time hourly tracking of projects - which supports the billing and accounting function - it is mostly used for the back-up and distribution of information. "When editing a document on the cloud, the document is instantly updated for all users involved; meaning several team members in different locations can access and edit documents instantly."

Wesselink said that a stable and uninterrupted internet connection is a key aspect to ensure business continuity when relying on cloud technology. "Businesses that rely on an ADSL connection must ensure a level of redundancy exists, for example a back-up router, to maintain ceaseless access to data. However, it is important to be aware that neither the ADSL infrastructure provider (such as Telkom), nor the ISP will enter into a service-level agreement that ensures uninterrupted connectivity, partly because of the co-dependant relationship between the infrastructure provider and the ISP.

"Another benefit of cloud computing is the option to use cloud systems as a developmental portal, users are able to test system architecture before committing fully and, if need be, users can revert back to previous snapshots, which minimises risk and saves time."

As the business outgrows the cloud entry point solution, services can be updated at minimum cost and effort to the company. "OpenWeb now operates completely in the cloud," concluded Wesselink.

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