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Technology allowing businesses to do more with less

Business First of Columbus - by Robert Celaschi For Business First

Technology trends for 2009 fall under the heading of "lightening the load." Through services such as cloud computing and products such as ultra-light weight netbooks and Voice over Internet Protocol, companies increasingly are simplifying the burden of maintenance, updates and licensing.

And companies that own heavy computing muscle also want to lighten their loads of electricity.

"Our discussions with our clients this year tend to be more around tech as a utility," said Kurt Hoeft, a partner at technology outsourcing company **EasyIT** in Dublin.

Instead of doing everything for themselves, companies are more willing to pay others for such things as remote monthly backups and software upgrades. The fixed monthly cost doesn't necessarily save money if the business had been squeezing the maximum life out of old software.

"But then people start to realize the time spent by their staff in the care and feeding of their applications," Hoeft said.

The old phrase for tapping into software hosted on somebody else's server was "software as a service." Nowadays, the term "cloud computing" is more in vogue.

Research firm IDC predicted cloud computing – which allows business applications to be accessed via the Internet while the software and data are stored on somebody else's servers – will grow nearly threefold by 2012 to become a $42 billion market. It should accelerate over time, accounting for 25 percent of IT spending growth in 2012 and nearly one-third the following year, according to IDC.

One advantage of cloud computing is not having to buy software for each computer. The user logs into the remote server, types in a password, and instantly has access to, say, the Microsoft Office suite without it being on the desktop computer's hard drive.

MEDIA
WORLDWIDE IT CLOUD SERVICES
Spending 2008, projected spending 2012
2008 $16.2B
2012 $42.3B
Storage 13% (expected to grow from 5% of total)
Business Applications 52% (expected to shrink from 57% of total)
Server 8%
Application development, deployment 9%
Infrastructure software 18%
Source: IDC
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Frank Hennebert, president of **ComputerSmith** in Westerville, said that means a business always is up to speed with the newest software and the newest hardware.

"It also means you are not buying the licenses that go with that," he said.

Cloud computing offers the advantage of being available from any place with an Internet connection. Google Apps is an example. It offers a variety of Web-based applications with the functionality of traditional office suites.

"We're getting more and more requests in the last five years of customers saying, 'We want to be able to work from anywhere.' You don't see anyone else's stuff, and nobody can see your stuff," Hennebert said, noting file access is password protected.

Power play

Another technology trend centers around power consumption. For server farms, data centers and other large owners of equipment, energy use has become top of mind. At the **Ohio Supercomputer Center** in Columbus, Director of Supercomputing Operations Kevin Wohlever has become an advocate of "green IT."

"Most computer centers that are over 10 years old were designed for maybe 100 watts per square foot. Now, some of these solutions are requiring 200, 250 maybe 300 watts per square foot," Wohlever said. "With some of these data centers, they are running out of power capacity before they are running out of floor space."

By 2015, data centers could account for 5 percent of all power consumption of the U.S., he said.

"Power issues are going to be a big issue to overcome in the near future. We have to go to a much more efficient cooling environment," he said. His rule of thumb now is one watt devoted to cooling for every watt needed to run a large system.

At the opposite end of the hardware spectrum, "netbook" computers are catching on. The sub-notebook PCs are retailing for less than $400.

As a measure of their popularity, IDC noted that Intel's Atom processor for netbooks has slowed the decline in microprocessor sales. Overall, manufacturers shipped 11.4 percent fewer microprocessor units in 2008 than in 2007. Without the Atom, the drop would have
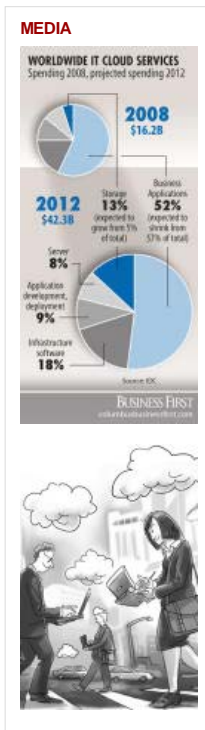
been 21.6 percent.

Among the manufacturers courting the netbook market is Emtec Electronics in Lewis Center. It is launching its Gdium netbook computer in Europe now and plans to add the U.S. market in the second quarter, targeting businesses and education. Weighing 2.6 pounds and sporting a 10-inch screen, the Gdium is not intended to replace a desktop unit.

"It's their second PC. They just want to get in to do some e-mails and check the Internet," said Chris Mack, executive vice president.

The netbook market is extremely competitive, but Emtec is hoping to differentiate its Linux-based Gdium by preloading it with 50 applications, including Skype, FireFox, the Open Office suite and VoIP.

The operating system, preferences and data can be stored on a USB key without leaving a copy on the computer.

Window watching

Small businesses also are finding more of a use for Microsoft's Home Server, said Hoeft of EasyIT. The 9-inch-tall server, introduced two years ago, is a useful tool in an office with up to 10 computers, he said.

"It does everything that a small business server does, but it goes farther in that it has a real impressive backup system for any workstation attached to it," Hoeft said.

The server essentially copies the hard drive of each computer, so a crash doesn't have to mean loss of data.

On the horizon from Microsoft is the Windows 7 operating system, officially slated for an early 2010 launch but possibly coming out before the end of this year.

Reviewers of the beta version say Windows 7 cleans up the major complaints of Vista. Interfaces have been streamlined, and there's more flexibility in the security settings.

Some features that came bundled with Vista have to be specially downloaded for Windows 7.

The slow economy, Hoeft said, is a good time for a company to take care of tech items that have been on the back burner such as Web site revisions.

"It provides a golden opportunity to get things implemented," he said. "Not necessarily go out and buy a lot of hardware, but look at your technology."

Robert Celaschi is a freelance writer.