



Software as a Service Ready for Prime Time?

by Dean Leung

Software as a Service (SaaS) is a software delivery model where applications are hosted by third parties, typically over the Internet (also known as the cloud), and made available to users on a per use or subscription basis. What many don't realize is that the SaaS model is already widely used by consumers and corporations.

On the consumer side, many people today are comfortable with storing private information in the cloud via Facebook and with sending their financial information to merchant processing systems such as PayPal and amazon.com.

In the corporate arena, backup data centers are often hosted offsite, and many organizations use cloud services for portions of their e-mail infrastructure. This might include anti-spam services such as Postini, which is owned by Google, and BlackBerry traffic that is routed through RIM's network operations center. The next logical step, then, is to move core services such as e-mail and document storage to the cloud as these services become as much a commodity as buying power from utilities.

Not all SaaS services are mature enough to include in a firm's network architecture, but there is a compelling argument for considering those that are fully developed. The potential benefits to organizations include:

- **Eliminating server hardware, software and backup applications**
- **Eliminating capital expenditures**
- **Minimizing start-up/setup costs**
- **Reducing operating expenses**
- **Eliminating maintenance and patching**
- **Eliminating the need for onsite or on-call server expertise**
- **Gaining automatic offsite backup**
- **Improving remote access and disaster recovery/business continuity capabilities**
- **Achieving desktop platform independence**
- **Reducing service requirements to having an Internet connection and a Web browser**

Google Apps is one of the most developed SaaS offerings. Google claims more than one million businesses and more than 10 million active users with thousands of major educational institutions using the system. Launched in 2006, Google Apps is customized with your organization's domain name and focuses

on messaging and collaboration features. The free service is available for up to 50 users with 7.3 GB per user of e-mail storage and is funded by easily ignored ads on the right column. However, this Standard version only has self-service online support and no service level agreement (SLA). Google's ad-free Premium edition, our focus in this article, goes for \$50 per user per year and includes 25 GB per user of e-mail storage, a 99.9 percent uptime SLA, migration tools, live support and Postini's e-mail security and archiving products. Let's take a look at some of the features of Google's SaaS offering.

Messaging

Available in 40 languages, the messaging component works much like the consumer Gmail service, providing e-mail, shareable calendar, sharable contacts, instant messaging, anti-spam and antivirus capabilities accessed via an SSL-secured session. Google includes tools for migrating existing mailboxes on servers such as Exchange to Google Apps. There are also APIs which allow for synchronizing the addition or deletion of users, and other changes, with internal systems.

To safeguard against a service or Internet outage, or to provide for a notebook user, you can enable the offline feature, which will cache the mailbox locally. Or, those who wish to continue to use Outlook can manage their mailboxes via IMAP synchronization.

Collaboration

This service offers the ability to create, edit, save and control versions of documents, spreadsheets and presentations within the Web interface. The word processor even has rudimentary styles and redlining capabilities. A powerful feature is the ability to create extranet functionality for external clients so that they can collaborate on a document in real time.

Documents can be saved in a folder structure, which can mimic a matter-centric environment, and then be exported in MS Office, Open Office and PDF formats. Users can also e-mail an attachment directly to Google Docs for collaboration.

Through this service users can also create Web-based forms to gather information. These forms can tabulate results in a spreadsheet providing the capability to do Web surveys as well as event registration. These can be hosted for internal

consumption (intranet) or externally as a part of an extranet. A site can also be created and hosted with the built-in Google Sites tool.

Integration

One powerful feature of Google Apps is the ability to integrate these applications with the entire “Googlesphere” of products. This includes Google’s powerful search engine, which provides full-text searching of all the e-mail messages and files a user has access to.

This integration also extends to mobile products. Using either ActiveSync to synchronize with built-in mobile applications, or natively downloaded Google applications, you can access documents as well as synchronize e-mail, calendars and contacts with virtually any BlackBerry, iPhone, Android, Symbian or Windows Mobile device.

Further integration with Google Maps provides directions as well as location of peers. The new Latitude feature allows you to selectively share your location with others both in and out of your organization. Conceptually this can be used to locate people in a disaster recovery situation or when people are frequently on the road.

Enhancements

Google is constantly innovating by enhancing features and adding services. Their newest service is Google Voice which provides a universal phone number with smart redirect of voice and SMS messages to the number(s) of your choosing. With Google Voice, you have the ability to screen, block and record incoming calls while outgoing U.S. calls are free. Voicemail can be customized based on the caller and can be setup to be transcribed and forwarded to your mailbox. This feature could be adapted for a rotating after-hours or on-call service so users have a single number to call.

Support and Training

To facilitate the migration, training and ongoing support of the system, Google has several online support tools. These include:

- **End user training materials and videos**
- **FAQ and knowledge base**
- **Sample project deployment timelines and communications**
- **Helpdesk and support staff troubleshooting training**

Concerns

While the features are compelling, the SaaS and cloud computing models are still nascent and evolving, with features and best practices yet to be developed. The following drawbacks should be considered before adopting these models:

- **Integration with desktop applications is mediocre**

(though integration is improved if you utilize Microsoft’s SaaS offering).

- **Web applications are not as fully developed as a desktop client.**
- **Security, backup and privacy are entrusted to a third party.**
- **SLA agreements are untested.**
- **Jurisdiction of the data is a concern given privacy as well as search and seizure laws.**

Missing features will be addressed with the availability of Google APIs, and it won’t be long before third parties create legal vertical applications such as redlining and metadata removal, which will be hosted in the cloud.

Conclusion

Is the SaaS model ready for prime time? The answer depends on the specific needs of an organization and that organization’s willingness to embrace change. The low barriers to entry and high potential ROI make it easy to set up a test system and evaluate the features and functionality. If any features meet the needs of your organization, then it would be wise to adopt those first and wait for the balance to mature.

While there are still some growing pains with the collaboration tools, the messaging and mobile components are mature and well worth considering, especially for organizations with limited financial and IT resources. Transferring a commodity service like messaging into the cloud will save both IT capital and intellectual resources and allow both to be refocused on innovation in the legal marketplace. **ILTA**



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