Head in the Cloud

EDP's Peter Davey discusses the growth of Cloud Computing, the benefits to business and how the company's hosted services data centre is helping builders' merchants.

A cross the globe much of the business environment is operating in the Cloud. We use Cloud Computing, Cloud Backup, documents in the Cloud — it seems that these days we are hearing the term everywhere, but what does it really mean? And how is it revolutionising a multitude of business sectors?

Indeed, if you ask people 'what is the Cloud?' you might well get a different answer every time. The phrase is being used more and more in business today so it is important for any professional to understand what Cloud Computing is all about.

The general consensus is that Cloud Computing is the future of IT, yet the term covers an umbrella of differing services such as SaaS (Software-as-a-Service), Cloud Backup, Disaster Recovery... However, they do all involve remote services and the internet, meaning the way we store, exchange, access and use data is changing forever.

The term 'Cloud Computing' basically (if rather loosely) refers to managing services and business remotely via the web, placing more and more data online and having less and less held locally on company PCs or Servers — hardware that businesses in the past would have to purchase and maintain.

By using Cloud Computing not only is the maintenance burden and purchase of hardware reduced, but you may scale your system up or down on demand. Two of the real drivers behind this technology are obviously a reliable connection — as speeds have increased, so have the services that are now available — and a proven server provider.

However, perhaps the strongest driver is that whilst hardware costs have reduced dramatically over recent years, the consequent proliferation of servers, together with increasing complexity of technology, is driving the cost of managing and maintaining systems ever higher. Today, many companies simply cannot afford to recruit and retain the necessary skills.

Back in 1999, EDP recognised that the internet would have a profound effect on today's business methodologies and invested significantly in building a dedicated data centre based in Milton Keynes putting it ahead of the Cloud Computing game and allowing it to lead the way in providing Software-as-a-Service (SaaS). Recognising the benefits of this model and the significant trend towards Cloud Computing, over 70% of EDP's customers elect to use this well proven service in order to facilitate access to their business critical information anywhere and at any time.

Whilst enabling them to make speedy and efficient responses to the ever changing demands of business, hosted services ensure every angle of our customers' IT overheads are well managed. As such, SaaS solutions have become a common model for many business applications and suppliers such as EDP manage the infrastructure and platforms on which the applications run. SaaS is sometimes referred to as "on-demand software" and in many cases, a business may be able to substantially reduce its IT department's overheads and with applications hosted centrally, updates are seamless, without the need for users to install new software.

Another key area of notable growth over the past few years has been in the Online Backup Services. Sometimes referred to as Cloud Backup, this involves securely encrypting and automatically backing up all your files on desktops and laptops, databases and emails stored on Windows servers, to secure off-site servers at EDP's data centre — giving complete peace of mind that valuable business data is secure.

With the majority of businesses now employing email servers, file servers and applications servers, storing data in multiple formats — ranging from Microsoft Word documents to SQL databases — it is crucial for any business to have an effective automatic data backup regime. People inevitably make mistakes i.e. they forget to initiate a backup, or devices such as USB sticks fail. Therefore regular backups and automated procedures are essential. No more human error, no more backup tapes or USB sticks, just a secure and automated service that ensures you can recover those documents and data that are vital to your business.

A new service being rolled out by EDP is Disaster Recovery. In the event of a 'disaster' affecting your business or server, such as theft, vandalism, fire, flood or data hacking, you'd have to ask yourself the question "Would

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you still be able to open for business?" whether that was physically within your premises or having access to your systems and communication tools.

However unlikely, disasters do happen. With your servers down for any length of time, can you afford to risk losing your data? Lost time can mean lost customers, lost revenue and lost profits. The Disaster Recovery & Business Continuity services from EDP are designed to protect against unforeseen events at your premises. We can host your business-critical applications in the event of a disaster, enabling you to recover and continue to operate with minimum disruption.

This means that key workers can access your IT system from virtually any location and continue working within a very short space of time. It's about minimising your exposure to data or business loss at an affordable cost, whilst at the same time mitigating risk to keep control over future insurance premiums.

The Cloud opens up new opportunities for businesses to increase efficiency and reduce costs and at EDP, we feel we are well placed to ensure builders' merchants benefit from the new technologies and applications that will facilitate this.

Peter Davey is the Sales Director at Electronic Data Processing, a leading developer and provider of specialist software solutions for the builders' merchant sector.

For more information on the products and services available from EDP circle readerlink 139.