Cloud computing & small businesses – setting the scene

Written by Dan Conlon, Engineering Director, Trend Micro

Cloud computing represents both a fantastic opportunity and a lingering threat to small business owners. The benefits of lowering capital expenditure on computing infrastructure by outsourcing certain tasks to a trusted provider who can do it faster, cheaper and more efficiently are hugely compelling. Yet the dangers of losing control over IT and more importantly your customers' data, of choosing the wrong service provider or suffering availability issues are very real.

Small business owners need to be able to distinguish the reality from the hype, pick their way through the cloud computing minefield and discover which model works best for their business – the right balance between the cloud and traditional on-premise IT. They need to be aware of the risks and understand how to minimize them, so that cloud computing helps to drive their business forward rather than hold it back.

Setting the scene

Most small business computing environments are Windows-based (although the Mac is certainly gaining ground), and mobile devices are a key element of the IT infrastructure. More importantly, perhaps, the small business also often suffers from a lack of resources – technological, human and financial. This means that in practice there's unlikely to be an IT team or even an IT expert to manage your company's technology infrastructure.

Instead, technology is acquired and implemented as needed with whatever funds are available rather than as part of a strategic plan. As a result, systems are patched together from numerous different vendors, consisting of different versions of software, products of different ages and differing levels of performance. These solutions may be lacking in the kinds of security features a business needs, such as central visibility and updating, alerting to OS vulnerabilities, control of internet usage and protection against removable media risks. As a result, firms are often at risk as it can be a struggle, especially for non-IT or non-security experts, to keep up with current threats and system patches.

Are you using the cloud?

The simple answer to this question is yes. There are very few people or businesses across the globe which aren't using cloud computing in some form or other. Whether they realize it or not is another matter as there is still widespread confusion and ignorance about cloud computing.

Put simply, cloud computing is a system which allows customers on-demand access via the internet to a shared pool of computing resources - including networks, servers, storage, applications, or services. The most likely model which small businesses will use is Software as a Service – where apps running on the service provider's cloud infrastructure (i.e. in their data centers) are delivered on demand to the customer's internet connected machine, and if billed will usually be done so on a monthly subscription basis.

Given these definitions, your business may have one or all of the following provided as a cloud-based service.

Email: If you use email but do not have a server (as 90 per cent of small businesses don't), then it will be a cloud-based email service hosted on servers in your providers' data centers and delivered to you on-demand via the internet.

Web sites: What company doesn't have a web site today? It's the essential virtual store front and a key means of interacting with your customers in cyber space. Again, if you don't run it from a server on the premises then it is being done 'in the cloud' by a third party hoster.

Social media: LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook and others are all becoming essential web-based tools to market your business, chase leads and interact with customers and potential employees. They are all services run from data centers in the US or Europe and delivered to your internet-connected PC or mobile device.

Online productivity tools: Until recently confined to the desktop, productivity tools which enable word processing, spreadsheet and presentation making have gone online and cloud-based. Think Google Docs, and Microsoft's Office Web Apps.

Business apps: Increasingly vendors such as Sage, Oracle, SAP and others are offering small business products in a SaaS model. SaaS removes the need for upfront license costs and ongoing maintenance/ updates which are usually included in the monthly subscription fees. It makes it easier to switch vendors, can be easily scaled up or down and means apps can be accessed from any internet-connected device.

Online storage and back-up: Many organizations are realizing it makes sense to subscribe to a cloud-based service which can keep your data secure and constantly available in the latest version wherever you access it. Devices have become expendable. The true value lies with the data that's on them and that's why a cloud-based back-up service could help to reassure you by having everything in one safe and secure place – the cloud.