How small businesses can succeed with the cloud

By James White

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In today's ever-changing, technologically-driven world, the notion of adopting new technologies is an intimidating and frightening thought for many businesses. However, these considerations can be more challenging to deal with from the perspective of smaller businesses, which may already be working with a limited budget or a virtually non-existent IT department.

Without a doubt, it's hard to pinpoint the finer details of how exactly technology will continue to progress in the foreseeable future. The fear of obsolescence understandably plays a crucial role when small businesses are deciding on particular technology to employ. This is only a natural response, since making financially sound assessments is necessary to thrive in today's market.

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With that being said, forgoing new technologies is certainly not an advantageous path for smaller businesses that are looking to thrive in a market where customers expect "the latest and greatest." By opting to stay with antiquated systems, businesses will almost always come across as outdated and irrelevant. Continued use of such legacy systems can also end up being more costly and difficult for businesses.

So the fundamental question becomes, how can small businesses most appropriately utilise technological opportunities to remain relevant and compete with larger businesses?

For many small businesses, the answer and the keys to success can be discovered through the implementation of the cloud.

What is the cloud?

Although many businesses have heard of the cloud, it's difficult to conceptually grasp what it is. Fundamentally, cloud computing is a term that refers to any type of computing work that is hosted online via the internet. Since this work is hosted in a centralised location on the internet, that means that it's ultimately available at any time, anywhere, and from any device that is capable of accessing the internet.

In the past, businesses had to purchase software and manually install it on its machines. Under the cloud model, business software can be run online by a third-party provider and can be opened through a web browser - eliminating the need to "physically own" any software.

This principle can likewise be applied to data storage. Rather than keeping vast archives of your business's files on your own computer, you can choose to remotely store these files through the cloud. This enables these files to be opened from any computer with internet access.

Why use the cloud?

At its core, the cloud can become a means for small businesses to reap the benefits of big business infrastructure, without needing an IT staff to implement and manage various softwares and servers.

Beyond that, there are other attributes of cloud computing that are beneficial to small businesses:

- **Cloud computing is affordable upfront**. Rather than spending thousands of dollars to buy or develop a system,

small businesses can opt to embrace the cloud's pay-as-you-go model. With the cloud, companies can totally bypass any in-house costs associated with acquiring and maintaining physical file storage space, software, or servers.

• **Cloud computing is flexible to the needs of a specific business**. Since there's no physical equipment to maintain, cloud computing can easily be adjusted to a company's specific needs. In other words, the cloud can grow and change in direct correlation with the manner in which your business may grow and change.

• **Cloud computing embraces automation**. The cloud can eliminate many of the ancillary aspects of managing a business. Instead of having to invest in some sort of IT support to keep your software or systems updated and maintained, the cloud has automation capabilities that allow small businesses to devote more time to focusing on activities that are central to your line of work.

• **Cloud computing fosters competitiveness**. Cloud technology makes it possible for smaller businesses to compete with larger organisations. Although smaller companies don't have the kind of financial freedoms to develop and maintain various in-house systems, the cloud gives you an opportunity to level the playing field and embrace tools that were once out of reach.

• **Cloud computing is easy**. Since the transfer of business information into the cloud is straightforward, and there's no need to manually install new hardware or software, utilising cloud-based services can be quite seamless to users. It doesn't require much technical knowledge.

How to set up the cloud

In terms of setting up the cloud yourself, first consider the specific needs of your small business. There are many different cloud-based technologies available, as well as many different cloud-based hosting platforms.

If your need for file space is small, you could make use of Dropbox or Google Drive. However, if you're looking for more space, it might be appropriate to consider options like Amazon's Web Services or Rackspace. Small businesses could even consider open source personal cloud servers like ownCloud, Network Attached Storage (NAS) devices like Transporter, or portable Wi-Fi devices like the SanDisk Connect Wireless Media Drive.

Because there are so many different cloud-based opportunities available, there isn't one "correct" way to set up the cloud. It would be beneficial to have an employee who is [trained in information technology and technical support](). Ultimately, it's important to consider your specific needs and search for what suits you best.

How to use the cloud

The cloud is a versatile technological opportunity that can offer small businesses plenty of advantages. Small businesses [can use the cloud]() for:

• **Data backup** - Since the cloud offers automated processes, it not only enables your data to automatically update as you work, but it also creates copies of your data that are not stored on any sort of physical machine.
• **Mobile offices** - Given that the cloud enables users to access and sync data from wherever they are, businesses can create fully functional mobile offices.

• **Information sharing** - With the cloud having the capability to store files in a centralised location over the Internet, sharing files becomes as easy as simply accessing a given company's cloud space.

• **File Storage** - The cloud can enable you to shift files off of your local system and free up a significant amount of hard drive space on computers used for work.

How secure is the cloud?

Given the fact that the cloud can serve as a centralised location for your files and applications, it's important to consider security. Without a doubt, any security breach could prove to be extremely detrimental for your business. Likewise, if your business's purchased storage space crashed and all your data was erased, your business would inevitably suffer.

Although these are valid concerns, generally speaking, cloud applications tend to offer higher security than most "on-premise IT," since the infrastructure is less accessible to employees at the workplace or malware.

However, you should still speak with your service provider to understand what level of security they will make available to you. Be sure to consider the way that they handle risk assessment, authentication, encryption, and data loss prevention.

Beyond what is available through your service provider, you can also seek to utilise Managed Service Providers (MSP). You'll have access to a more dynamic threat detection system, complete with real-time dashboards that enable you to proactively monitor and identify anything you see as a potential threat.

Take advantage of cloud computing

Overall, it should come as no surprise that cloud computing services have become an enticing opportunity for small businesses looking to grow and compete in today's market. By offering an affordable, straightforward, flexible, and secure technological tool, the cloud truly functions as an important innovation in today's market.

So what are you waiting for? Use cloud computing to take advantage of the tools large businesses have had access to for years. It's time for your small business to level the playing field.

ABOUT JAMES WHITE

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