

Why pay for IT?

With Cloud Computing, Internet users no longer have to pay hefty fees for software and applications, writes **Yavar Ehsan**

THE first general purpose computer, ENIAC, cost \$500,000 back in 1946. Weighing 27 tonnes, occupying 680 sq. feet and consuming 150 kilowatts power, it was primarily used by the US Army, among other things, to make calculations for the hydrogen bomb. But the computer could only make limited number of calculations and had fewer functions. 44 years later, in 1990, Timothy Berners-Lee established the first communication between two computers using the HTTP protocol which we today know as the Internet. Combining both the breakthroughs, we have reached a point where we are able to use highly sophisticated and powerful miniature computers in comparison to the ENIAC to literally send billions of communication packets every second across the much enhanced Internet today.

This has given rise to the concept and popularly coined term 'Cloud Computing' which is simply Internet-based computing. That means all sorts of information, applications, including operating systems become available to the users upon request via the Internet. Cloud Computing provides services, software solutions, applications, and storage spaces online. If you have an email account on Yahoo, G-mail, Hotmail or the like, you are using the simplest form of the Cloud. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) applications, Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) applications, and development platforms are fast becoming popular with small to medium size businesses. And the amazing part is that variants of all most all such resources are available free.

With Google Docs and Zoho Office providing reasonable office applications, they are placed on top of our free list followed by Zoho's CRM applications. Amazon and Sun alike providing platforms for development and storage space along with virtual servers; Microsoft introducing the Windows Azure as a platform; IBM providing universities with free cloud computing services and Amazon's e-book reader - the Kindle, its free books though are yet to be authorised for India. Revenue for Software as a Service (SaaS) is expected to hit \$8.5 billion this year,

up from \$7.5 billion last year. What is soon to become popular in work-places is the Cloud printing service or CPS which will allow sending commands from practically anywhere in the world to your printer on the Cloud.



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A segment of the Cloud which is gradually finding takers is 'Virtual Desktops', these are applications available on the Internet which provide you a personalised Virtual Computer Desktop with your applications and files available any time anywhere. The beauty is that your virtual desktop would remain as you left it last time no matter where you access the system from or which system you use. For a user with basic requirements they have everything one requires. For grammar and spell checking along with plagiarism detection there is Paperater.com. Need an antivirus too? PC Magazine's editor's choice is Panda Cloud Antivirus. Trend Micro Housecall isn't bad either. And yes these too are freely available. So, all you need is a browser and you are ready to go. Well not so fast, you need an Operating System on which a browser can be installed! In our

free world, Ubuntu Operating System is a good option; it comes along with a browser and Open Office.

Although some CIOs might have apprehensions or concerns about Cloud hosts meeting proper standards of data security and assurance, a large number are definitely opening their doors and windows for the Cloud to shower its inherent savings. A bigger hurdle is probably the change of mindset in shifting away from the current hardware assets which have served their purpose along with certain liabilities. However, once we decide to move on, one can realise that the Cloud is quite agile and is able to adapt to the requirements of users. For CIOs the headache of scalability, maintenance, backup, security, and most importantly the pressure of 24x7 availability is an added perk. If benefits were limited to just that much it would be worth it but what also needs to be considered is the elimination of a company's man-hours and resources spent on the same. It is estimated that hardware and software expenditures are about 25 per cent of the total cost of the procured devices, the remaining 75 per cent being eaten up by maintenance. Not to have to worry about updating the latest software patches, updates and upgrades, or to be concerned about your local system getting hacked, attacked by viruses or physically damaged, it is an amazing feeling. Imagine the total relief from hardware and software ownership, licensing concerns, hardware lifecycles, data security and compliance issues!

With companies like Google setting the tone to create a win-win situation for everyone, free Cloud computing is here to stay. Giants like Microsoft were forced to rethink their strategy and will be coming out with their Web apps as part of their Office 2010 Business Productivity Online Suite in India very soon. For a normal user today all that is required is a decent system and a stable Internet connection. There is no reason for any business or individual to stay behind and not tap into the freely available resources.

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