



Five IT trends to accelerate your business

An efficient, well-run information technology platform is essential to every business, but it's a competitive advantage for companies that can forecast what employees and customers will need from their systems.



Debra A. Pierson

During 18 years of installing, configuring and connecting IT services and systems for large and small customers, I've noticed five distinct trends that can accelerate any business.

1. Collaboration

Technology that enhances teamwork, increases productivity and sharpens communication among teams, divisions and continents is a business advantage. Communication breakdowns are costly and disruptive. Video conferencing systems such as Google+, Web conferencing like GoToMeeting, and even FaceTime on the iPhone can be used as collaboration tools.

Whether you have one conference room in Harrisburg or 500 across the East Coast, businesses are discovering that interactive whiteboards (including the well-known Smart Board brand) are essential to their conference and training rooms. A technology almost exclusive to schoolchildren has evolved into a significant tool for increased collaboration in the workplace.

For example, the PolyVision eno Board is an interactive whiteboard that doubles as a standard conference room marker board. Providing "backwards compatibility" to those not as technically savvy, it is also a state-of-the-art electronic whiteboard with Web surfing, data sharing, PowerPoint and spreadsheet capability, and Microsoft pen tools to mark up documents in real-time. When combined with Web conferencing tools, even coworkers who are not physically in the conference room can participate.

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REGION



THE CLOUD IS A RAY OF SUNSHINE FOR SMALL BUSINESSES

BY LISA ALLEN | Contributing Writer

Computing in the cloud is rolling into the small business atmosphere, area computer consultants say.

But what is "the cloud?"

"No one has defined what the cloud is," said Jason Abel, partner and co-founder of IntermixIT in Harrisburg. "It's a loose term that is used for a lot of things."

"Our definition is any resource that can be accessed without the resource being internal," he said. "So if you're accessing a file that isn't on a server at your location, that's the cloud. The cloud is not new. It's getting buzz because smaller businesses are using it."

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REGION

AppMobi helping developers build smartphone app market

BY TIM STUHLREHER
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Some companies are known for making the right tools for the job. Think John Deere for tractors, Singer for sewing machines or Black & Decker for power drills.

Lancaster software company appMobi aims to be that trusted, one-stop shop for the people who write software for smartphones, tablets and other mobile devices.

The company this year unleashed a slew of products and services for the mobile app development community.

Last month, it unveiled MobiUs, billed as the first mobile browser developed specifically for HTML 5, the latest version of the protocol used to write Web page code.

"This has been a concerted effort to take advantage of what we see as a unique moment" to serve an emerging technology, CEO David Kennedy said.

The effort seems to be working. The number of developers using appMobi products doubled over the past three

months, and the company has grown this year from 18 employees to 28, Kennedy said.

"The market is still pretty wide open, and they have a fresh, comprehensive approach," Lancaster entrepreneur and tech guru Charlie Crystle said.

Generally, appMobi's competitors focus on a single product or service, so offering a suite "has really proven to be an advantage for us," Kennedy said.

Mobile Web usage — people using handheld devices to access the Internet — is growing exponentially. IT powerhouse Cisco predicts worldwide mobile Web traffic will increase

26-fold from 2010 to 2015.

In the U.S., 87.4 million people now have smartphones, and 40 percent use them to browse the Web and download apps, according to ComScore, an industry analytics firm based in Reston, Va. Yet mobile Web traffic still accounts for just 7 percent of total U.S. Web traffic, according to Dublin, Ireland-based analytics firm StatCounter, indicating vast potential for more expansion.

AppMobi doesn't create apps or mobile Web sites. Rather, it creates the

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Kennedy

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2. The Cloud

Companies are moving to service-based computing systems. Google Apps and Google Docs are examples of cloud computing where data remains in one place with easy access for all employees. In a measure to reduce government spending on technology, The Wall Street Journal stated on Aug. 9: "Instead of spending a lot of money up front buying new systems that it runs itself, the government is shifting to a more flexible model in which it uses or rents online applications run over the Internet. That shift helped drive the government's recent decision to shut down 40 percent of its 2,000 data centers over the next four years. Companies that offer these new so-called 'cloud' services stand to benefit the most from the new federal strategy."

The cloud enables small businesses to "stay focused, be more collaborative and bring products to market more quickly because they've got access to the kind of infrastructure that only large companies used to have," said Judith Hurwitz, president and CEO of Hurwitz & Associates and a coauthor of "Cloud Computing for Dummies" (PC World: "Should

You Move Your Small Business to the Cloud?").

3. Data

In today's workplace, we have more data than we can absorb, so the key is making business sense out of the existing data. Data-mining tools are available to help businesses make better real-time decisions regarding customers, products, and services. Using Facebook Insights for data mining, companies can discover and predict consumer behaviors and trends in real time. "CIOs increasingly help their public and private sector organizations cope with complexity by simplifying operations, business processes, products and services. To increase competitiveness, 83 percent of CIOs have ... plans that include business intelligence." (IBM: The Essential CIO).

4. Mobility

Our smartphones are getting smarter, and more businesspeople are carrying tablet devices such as the iPad to connect faster and increase accessibility. Thousands of applications are available daily to customize mobile devices for individual industries and situations.

From apps that manage projects and people to those for specific industries such as machining, commercial driving and construction, these aids allow businesses to make better use

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of their employees' skills and minds, turning them into knowledge workers valuable for the new economy.

5. Green

There is a continued, sustained movement to save energy costs with our technology use. Servers are smaller and more energy efficient, and companies are finding ways to power and cool data centers in ways that reduce operating expenses.

School districts, government agencies and health care facilities now are working with energy performance specialists to lower energy costs. Quick changes that save energy include replacing older CRT monitors with more efficient flat-panel monitors that have auto-power save features built in.

In the data center environment, replacing individual servers with blade servers is an option. A blade server is a stripped-down server computer, designed to be housed with 10 or more other blades in an

enclosure, thus reducing power consumption, network cabling, management and space constraints. Over the past five years, the commonwealth of Pennsylvania has been migrating to blade servers, providing significant power and cost savings. The IBM blade servers are 23 times faster than the older individual servers and provide a 96 percent reduction in energy costs.

"Just 10 years ago, computer equipment consumed far more electricity than the current EPA Energy Star products. As computer power use has dropped, so has its associated heat gain, which has correspondingly cut building air conditioning loads. New energy standards will accelerate this downward trend in energy use as future building codes will require computer systems to be powered down during unoccupied periods," said Dan Kerr, director of energy services for Harrisburg-based McClure Co.

Understanding IT trends and making changes to hardware and software systems is game-changing for companies. The only resource more influential than IT is the people powering the technology.

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IN THE CUBE

Managing editor Andréa Maria Cecil funnels her gadget obsession into a Business Journal blog: the gadget cube. Learn how your "shinies" can make you more productive and efficient on the job. Here's an excerpt:

Google recently rolled out Google+ Pages, enabling businesses and brands to take advantage of one more social media platform.

"We want to make sure you can build relationships with all the things you care about — from local businesses to global brands," Google said.

So, now you've got another option. Or, in some cases, one more page to manage.

How will you use Google+ Pages?

—Nov. 9

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