

IT forecast: Cloudy



BY NOEL STEWART

Keeping up with the latest technology may mean having your head in the clouds.

LET'S face it, when it comes to IT, buzzwords are a dime a dozen. Chances are the technology you heard about last month has already been superseded by some shiny new acronym.

There is one such buzzword, however, that is here to stay and is beginning to revolutionise the way we use computers: 'cloud', or more accurately, 'cloud computing'.

Perhaps the best way to explain cloud computing is to use an analogy. Before households were connected to mains electricity, all electrical devices were powered using a generator. Today, we can simply plug an appliance into a wall socket. We don't need our own generator because power stations generate the electricity for us. Computing is heading in the same direction.

In the near future, everything will be delivered to you online; perfect examples of this are webmail applications such as Gmail or the social networking site Facebook.

All these applications are interactive, they don't need to be installed on your computer to run and can be accessed anywhere in the world through the use of a web browser.

Because such applications are accessed on demand, the resources and capacity of desktop computers and servers become less relevant as all the computational processing is performed elsewhere before it is presented on your screen.

It is inevitable that medical software will follow suit, resulting in several advantages for healthcare providers and practices — with a word of caution.

Cloud computing will lower the technological barriers to entry for existing and prospective medical providers. Capital expenditure items, such as servers, may no longer reside on your premises and will likely be rented from a cloud computing provider.

Today, cloud servers are built on a large-scale shared infrastructure to ensure more disk space and processing power, the automation of tasks, such as backups and software updates, as well as the availability of data and records that can be accessed anywhere and anytime using a computer or other web-enabled devices such as a netbook, iPad or mobile phone.

From a big-picture perspective, cloud computing could enable healthcare providers to shift their focus away from purchasing and maintaining their own IT infrastructure, and concentrate on service delivery and innovation.

So what's the catch? With no regulation, cloud computing is somewhat of a double-edged sword. If data is physically stored outside your organisation, who owns it? Who has access to it? Then there are issues with long-term viability; what happens to your data if your cloud computing provider goes out of business?

These are serious questions that need to be addressed through government legislation before sensitive medical data is hosted on the cloud.

Despite this lack of governance, individuals and businesses are adopting cloud computing at an astonishing rate. Social networking sites, customer relations management systems and browser-based payroll and accounting systems are a few examples.

The development of Australia's National Broadband Network will springboard cloud computing into the mainstream by facilitating data transfer at extremely fast speeds, making the 'cloud' a viable option in the future. ●

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