[INSIDE INDUSTRY]

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The technology trend: Centralization

Like weather, fashion and the economy, technology is cyclical. Case in point, 20 years ago we were all working off mainframes and had no individual software. Until Bill Gates (Microsoft®) and Steve Jobs (Apple®) arrived on the technology scene, desktop software was unheard of and everything was centralized.

Today, the desire to centralize systems is back, fueled by the maturation of Web-based software. With the ability to create and distribute feature-rich Web software, organizations can increase efficiency while decreasing administration all in a secure environment. Web-based software re-centralizes the expense, effort and assets associated with information systems.

The best way to determine if your organization would be better served with centralized systems is to compare these options to the alternative — desktop software.

Desktop software

Desktop software is installed on an individual computer. Someone has to either sit at that specific computer to use the software or access the software across a network.

Individual software has traditionally been geared for a small organization or in an organization where employees have varying software needs. In a small shop, a company can purchase one copy of software and then purchase licensing rights for the additional computers using the software. It can be tedious and time consuming loading software on every computer and even more of a hassle if the software is misplaced. The ultimate desktop administrative nightmare is upgrading each machine.

The upgrading headache is one of Web software's most compelling attractions. Web software is centrally located on a server allowing an IT manager to operate, manage, fix and upgrade in one location for mass distribution. This server may be company-owned, or it is also common practice to "rent" server space from third-party companies — a hosted solution.

Intranets

"Intranet" was coined to put a name on a private version of the Internet. Most companies have networks in their building that are capable of hosting and serving Web sites in the same fashion as the Internet. Many companies will place a Web server on their private network to serve up Web-based applications that are only accessible to employees on the network. This architecture counts on the network's security and allows access to the Web software for anyone who has logged in.

Extranets

A Web-based application that is made public yet provides its own security is an "extranet". The system is hosted on a Web server, but the first screen a visitor is presented is a login screen where the user is challenged for a user name and password. For security sensitive applications, it is common practice to encrypt Web browser sessions using a common technology called SSL (Secured Sockets Layer). SSL is active when the small lock icon at the bottom of your browser closes to indicate that the session is "locked".

Consider these examples. A municipality in a large metropolitan area in the south needed a way for its storm water inspectors to gather data from the field and enter it into a central location for EPA reporting. We designed a secured extranet application for data entry and reporting. Security measures protect the application from the public but allow employees to gain access anywhere in the region (or world) and do their jobs.

An extranet project involved a nationwide construction company that needed a system for managing its scaffold equipment that was scattered out over remote industrial jobsites, most with no servers or networks. At most, those on location connect to the "world" via an aircard. We set them up with a secured Web site so their scaffold management employees could conduct transactions and report scaffold usages to their client.

There is more upfront programming and design work setting up a Web-based application versus creating a desktop system, but in the long run these applications require less maintenance and grant more access to more people. They can be centrally managed and upgraded and now even downloaded to handheld devices and mobile phones.

Even if you aren't trendy by nature, the movement to centralize IT systems is compelling for medium-sized to large businesses and even for smaller organizations that have traveling company representatives.

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