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Clouds Now Strong Enough To Support Your Business

James E. Gaskin, *Network World* 10.06.2009 [ShareThis](#)

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Technology makes life easier for small businesses, even if you can't see that while cursing your personal computer for some problem or another today. Not only have hardware costs dropped by an order of magnitude over the past two decades, you can now run your business quite well without any hardware

beyond one laptop or netbook for every employee. The fuzzily-named "cloud" can support your business without any local hardware. And when you do want local hardware appliances, they should be tied into the cloud as well for disaster recovery support.

Let's define "cloud" as a hosted service leveraging hardware not in your location. You can have a private cloud, as many large companies do, by providing remote user services from a centralized but company owned data center. Mainframes could be called the original cloud with our definition, because few people were in the same location as their computer.

Prediction: Google acquires Salesforce in 2009?

Smaller companies, even those with multiple locations, find a private cloud expensive, making them overkill when balancing cost versus benefits. Third party clouds, however, can now do everything a business needs. The smaller the company, the more they should look to hosted "cloud" providers for services ranging from marketing to customer acquisition to accounting to project management to payroll. You don't have to use hosted services for all these things, but if you do, you'll save considerable money upfront and get constant software upgrades as part of your deal.

What technology does a small business need, whether real estate office or dry cleaners or restaurant or muffler shop? What comes to mind first, thanks to Microsoft's constant marketing, is a server. Since Novell shot itself in the foot so often it lost the majority share of the server market years ago, a server automatically means Microsoft to most people.

And what will our, say, new law firm with two attorneys expect their on-premise Microsoft server to provide? In terms of general purpose functions, a way to get e-mail, share files, and have a site on the Web. So let's look at each of these options.

First e-mail, a critical need today. Yes, you can host your own e-mail server, but please don't until you're large enough to have a full time administrator with security training on staff. Many malware writers and spam mongers love inexperienced companies leaving their unpatched and unmonitored Windows servers available for corruption. My spam filter will thank you for not becoming a spam bot spewing more garbage across the Internet.

Hundreds of hosted e-mail options are available for far, far less money than it costs to run your own e-mail server hardware and software. A handful of dollars per month per user gets you better, and more secure, e-mail service than you can provide with your own inhouse server. Microsoft's Exchange Online provides services directly or through resellers, but dozens of other services offer different but equivalent e-mail services, and [Google Apps](#) includes e-mail and more for \$50 per user per year. The "more" from hosted services usually includes shared

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