

Powering up plans to move to the cloud

Business development manager Alvis Tay was just looking at options for upgrading his company's computers from Windows XP to something more recent.

But after attending the four-hour Power Up Your Business SME (small and medium-sized enterprises) seminar hosted by Microsoft and Digital Life last Friday, he is now considering adopting the latest cloud version of Microsoft's Office services and software as well.

"I learnt a lot about Microsoft Office 365 at this talk," said Mr Tay, who also doubles as the IT manager at his 30-man company, Yargay, which specialises in creating clean environments for labs and data servers.

"I was impressed with its new functions and how it enables better collaboration in the office," he added.

He was one of the 90 SME representatives who signed up for the seminar held at the Singapore Management University.

With keynotes by representatives from Microsoft and Digital Life, as well as a live demonstration, participants were shown how companies could leverage on Microsoft's cloud-based Office 365 system for cheaper data storage and more efficient work collaboration.

"Office 365 could help a 50-man company halve its IT costs in three years," said Mr Gerald Leo, the business group lead at the Microsoft Office Division.

HUGE COST SAVINGS

Unlike the usual systems where companies store their data in internal servers, Office 365 allows companies to store their data in the cloud.

Instead of spending thousands of dollars buying and maintaining hardware and software, companies are charged on a per user basis for Office 365.

Rates start from \$15 per month per employee for a small company employing fewer than 10 employees. This includes 50GB of e-mail space, use of software tools such as Word, PowerPoint and Excel, as well as access to 25GB of Microsoft's secure cloud storage, SkyDrive Pro.

Microsoft maintains the day-to-day running and security of the service, which has been deployed across thousands of companies globally.

Costs are lower as they are distributed over a larger number of users, explained Mr Leo.

Chief operating officer of fabric and flooring company Goodrich Global, Mr Fandri Mutheardy, testified to being able to save costs with the new Office 365.

For its 100-man Singapore operations, the company would need

Microsoft Office 365 event addresses cost and security issues for interested firms, reports KASH CHEONG



ST PHOTO: PRISCILLA NG
 At the Power Up Your Business SME seminar were (from left) Mr Sherwin Loh, deputy editor of Digital Life; Mr Nigel Lim, IT manager of Adeka Singapore; Mr Gerald Leo, business group lead at the Microsoft Office Division; Mr Drew Graham, chief technology officer of eVantage Technology; and Mr Billy Teo, moderator at the panel session last Friday.

an estimated \$38,000 to maintain and upgrade its servers across three years. The same amount can now support five years' worth of cloud licences for his company, said Mr Mutheardy.

Aside from storage, Office 365 also allows users to share documents and co-edit them from any computer.

Mr Alan Dias, senior product marketing manager at Microsoft Office division, also demonstrated the new features of Office 365, including a more intuitive Excel, which saves users the hassle of remembering complex formulae. It also helps them create more impressive graphics.

The seminar allowed participants to voice their concerns about cloud services in terms of security and privacy.

Aside from ensuring that its cloud services are up and running 99.9 per cent of the time, Microsoft also protects data stored in its cloud services, noted Mr Leo.

"A company's data will not be mingled with another in the cloud, nor will it be mined for advertising purposes. Each time a Microsoft personnel accesses the data for troubleshooting, his name will be logged for accountability," Mr Leo said.

LEAVE SECURITY TO EXPERTS

In fact, outsourcing of data security to Microsoft should be a huge relief for companies with small or even no IT departments, explained IT manager Nigel Lim of Adeka Singapore, a food company which signed on with Office 365 earlier this year.

"Before that, we spent a lot of time patching to ensure security. Now, we leave that to the experts at Microsoft," he added.

Those mulling a move to Office 365 should also consider a few factors, said Mr Drew Graham, chief technology officer at eVantage Technology, a company which helps firms migrate to the cloud.

First, IT and business departments need to talk about their expectations of the new service and prioritise what needs to be moved to the cloud.

"Second, figure out how much data you have, where it is now and where it needs to be later," he said.

Data migration might take some time, so knowing how fast your Internet connections are allows you to consider what needs to be upgraded or re-thought to fit your time frames, he added.

Companies should also consider if they have the necessary hardware to support the new system.

Currently, the Government provides a Productivity and Innovation Credit (PIC) for companies when they make the switch to technologies such as Office 365.

However, the cost and the availability of services are not the only concerns SMEs have, said Mr Sng Fook Yuan, IT manager at audit firm SB Tan and Co.

"It is easy for tech-savvy workers to adopt new technology, but whether or not other employees can adapt to it is another question."

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OFFICE 365 TIPS

Aim for the Sky

SkyDrive Pro offers fuss-free cloud storage for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

If you are using Office 365, you automatically get 25GB of online space to store all your documents, images, videos and other important files on SkyDrive Pro.

This premium version of SkyDrive is designed for businesses, with many features that can help SMEs achieve productivity improvements and foster better collaboration.

Businesses can use SkyDrive Pro as a back-up of their essential documents, but it works best for documents that you need to co-author with your colleagues.

By default, all documents in your SkyDrive Pro account are private until you decide who you want to share them with.

You can easily share access to selected documents with your colleagues so that you can all work on them together.

Track changes to shared

documents by "following" those you have shared with your colleagues, as well as those which they share with you.

You can also easily tag documents to associate them with specific areas of interests so that others can easily search for them.

For instance, you could tag a document with #dinneranddance so that others in your organisation interested in your company's annual party can easily search and locate your document.

SkyDrive Pro is different from SkyDrive, the free online personal storage offered by Microsoft, in that SkyDrive Pro is intended for business purposes.

The library of contents is managed by the organisation and site administrators can control what staff members can do with the documents in the library.

For more information about SkyDrive Pro and Office 365, go to www.office365.com.

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