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e-Learning in "the Cloud"

By Stuart Campbell, Director of Software Development for SyberWorks, Inc.

You've probably heard a lot about "Cloud Computing" (also known as "Software as a Service" or "SaaS"). This refers to a movement to turn computer terminals and notebooks into "client" machines that primarily (or only) execute applications running on servers somewhere *out there* on the Web. For example, instead of running Word from a notebook's hard drive, you'd run a copy of the program that lives on a remote server…and perhaps even save your documents there.

This approach has advantages:

- Software use is monitored and controlled.

- Software version control is simplified.

- Virus dangers are minimized.

- Source data and resulting files may be stored, managed, and protected centrally, behind server firewalls.

- Less advanced (and expensive) computers can be issued to employees.

- A lost computer is less likely to compromise company or customer data.

And though the term "Cloud Computing" is fairly new, the concept itself is not. The insurance industry has done it for decade*s*. In the early '70s, sales agents for some of the larger insurers connected primitive "notepad computers" to a central corporate database through an analog modem. The agents dialed into the mainframe from clients' homes and edited and saved customer or prospect data back to the mainframe. So the insurance industry was an early adopter of PDS (pretty darn slow) Cloud Computing.

But that old Cloud ran over telco copper wire…at 300 bps. Today, thanks to widespread broadband networks, the Cloud is staging a comeback. Anyone who uses Flickr, ShutterFly, PhotoWorks, or YouTube is working there. Google is offering its own "cloud apps" (just *Google* "Google Docs").
And two of my own favorite Cloud tools (so far) are:

- *Gliffy Online Diagram Software*, for creating diagrams and flow charts through a browser. (http://www.gliffy.com/)

- *Pixlr*, a free online Photoshop work-alike. (http://www.pixlr.com/)

However, SyberWorks (and many of *your* companies) are *already* working "in the Cloud" when we host customer training campuses and materials on our own private servers. It's been part of our industry for some time.

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Still, as hinted above, the core applications that many of us use to create training content may also migrate to the Cloud. Text editors, spreadsheets, and Flash-authoring tools may move there. And e-Learning content will flourish there, in both our *own* hosted servers and those of third parties like YouTube. But remember that The Cloud also comes with weaknesses:

- Internet connections are required, and stable ones are often *essential*. If a Cloud connection drops during a session, users may lose time, work, or even data.

- Customers' data isn't necessarily their *own* in the Cloud. It might live on someone else's servers. True, users don't have to worry about keeping their software current, maintaining sufficient disk space, or managing access security. Cloud suppliers would be doing that. But this also gives suppliers a lot of control over their customers' data.

So even if you host your own private corner of the Cloud, remember that clouds (like darkened rooms) still scare some people. So anything you can do to protect your customers' data—and to show them that it's secure—will benefit both them and you.

About the Author

Stuart Campbell is Director of Software Development for SyberWorks, Inc., a privately-held supplier of e-Learning software and training. A native of the United Kingdom, he had previously served as a Principle Software Engineer, Senior Consultant, Senior Software Engineer, and Development Specialist for companies such as Brooks Automation Inc., Digital Equipment, and Honeywell Control Systems. His areas of expertise include Visual Studio.NET, C#, VB.NET, VB6, VBScript, XML, COBOL, WindowsXP, Windows2000, WindowsNT, VAX/VMS, UNIX, Oracle, SQLServer, Oracle Rdb, Oracle DBMS, and Agile Modeling Methodology.

About SyberWorks

SyberWorks, Inc. (www.syberworks.com) is a leader in the custom e-Learning Solutions and Learning Management System industries for Fortune 1000 corporations, higher education, and other organizations. Located in Waltham, Massachusetts, the company serves the multi-billion-dollar e-Learning market. Since 1995, SyberWorks has developed and delivered unique and economical solutions to create, manage, measure, and improve e-Learning programs at companies and organizations in the United States, Canada, Europe, and other countries.

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