Powering up plans to move to the cloud

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

The Power Up Your Business SME (small and medium-sized enterprises) seminar held by Microsoft and Digital Life last Friday, 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, Vargya, 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 50 SME representatives who signed up for the seminar held at the Singapore Management University.

With keynote speakers by representatives from Microsoft and Digital Life, as well as a live demonstration, participants were given an insight into what companies could leverage on Microsoft’s cloud-based Office 365 system for cheaper data storage and more efficient work collaboration.

“Office 365 helps to build 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 Roaming company Goodrich Global, Mr Parthi Murthy, testified to being able to save costs with the new Office 365.

For its 106-man Singapore operations, the company would need an estimated $38,000 to maintain and upgrade its servers across three years. The same amount can now support five years’ worth of cloud services for his company, said Mr Murthy.

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

Mr Alan Ooi, 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 formulas. 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 Aedeka 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.

“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 rethought 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 Sing Hock 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 it is another question,” smuhr@sppl.com.sg