

Business Trends

How Cloud Computing Is Helping Small Businesses Compete And Thrive

(NAPSA)—In today's economic climate, small businesses need every advantage they can find to get ahead. New technologies in the form of cloud computing are helping small businesses level the playing field against bigger competitors.

Cloud computing makes it possible for companies to access powerful software applications via the Internet for a simple monthly fee. Because the applications are delivered via the Internet, every small business can get access to the same innovations and tools that bigger competitors have been using for years. For instance, Microsoft Corp. recently launched Microsoft Office 365, which brings together the company's familiar Microsoft Office applications with its enterprise email, videoconferencing and other collaboration and communication capabilities delivered as a subscription service.

Using the cloud can help your business do the following:

1. Build a "borderless office." A good cloud service will connect you with colleagues and customers virtually anywhere via click-to-chat, videoconference or shared desktops, to work together whether you're across town or around the globe. Eliminating unnecessary travel by using these online tools will not only save on costs, it will help you run a green business.

Chaundra Smith, owner of Naturally Me, makes handcrafted, natural body care products in Durham, N.C. Using the cloud, she has set up a virtual team of consultants and staff members who all work together and collaborate in their "borderless" office.

Tip: Look for a cloud service that lets you make PC-to-PC voice and video calls and hold online meetings on the fly. You'll want to be able to share your desktop, online whiteboard and presentations with colleagues—as if you're



Imagination Yoga uses cloud computing to connect effectively with schools to reach and teach more students.

in the same room, even when you're a city or continent away.

2. Work how you want, where you want. The cloud untethers you from your desk and keeps you connected wherever you are. Web-enabled and offline access* to your important documents, email, contacts and calendars helps you stay nimble and responsive.

Team members at high-performance carmaker and parts company Shelby American, Inc. in Las Vegas travel frequently around the globe and require remote connectivity** to collaborate on new product development. Cloud-based tools help everyone stay connected and keep the business moving while out of the office.

Tip: Look for a cloud service that works on a PC, Mac and smartphone,** with consistent experience on each device. The best services help you edit spreadsheets, presentations and other documents with others in real time and view files from a browser or mobile device.

3. Invest in tomorrow without breaking the bank today. The cloud lets your small business run on the same technology that powers the Fortune 500, without hiring an army of IT experts, so you can focus on your core business.

Beyond cost savings, many small businesses realize additional benefits after they move to the cloud—better collaboration among employees, customers and partners means quicker sharing of ideas and problem resolution. A cloud-powered small business is more nimble and prepares you to adapt to changing business needs—now and in the future.

Imagination Yoga, a small, family-owned business in Portland, Ore., teaches a "kindness-based" curriculum, instructing children on yoga concepts and storytelling to spark their creativity and get them exercising. The company plans to use cloud-based collaboration to market its services, connect with more schools and families across the country, and create online enrollment options for customers, which saves time and money. The cloud also allows every Imagination Yoga employee to access the company's Microsoft Outlook calendar, keeping everyone on the same page.

Tip: Look for an offering that can grow with you but also work well with the tools you already use. You'll also want to safeguard your data with business-grade privacy, security and disaster recovery capabilities.

* Microsoft Office 2007 or 2010 required for offline capabilities.

** An appropriate device, Internet access and supported browser and/or network carrier connectivity are required. Data plan charges may apply.