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Rent Your Software: No Servers, No Installs, No Hassles

ASPs Are Changing The Way Consumers Use Software

by Wendy Gauntt

Rent or buy? Lease or purchase? Whether it's a home, a car, a copier, or an office building, most of us have had to make this choice at some point in our lives. But have you ever considered renting your software? You probably do it already—your email address is “rented” from your Internet Service Provider or the company who hosts your website. But the choices go far beyond just email.

A new crop of dot-coms has appeared in recent years. As a group, they are called Application Service Providers (ASPs), because they provide a service—a web-based software application. Instead of dealing with lengthy software installations, expensive servers, and painful upgrades, you simply connect to the Internet and start working. Upgrades take place automatically, with no effort on your part. Instead of a large upfront cost, you pay as you go, usually on a monthly basis.

So what's an example of this hot new technology, you ask? How can it help you? Here's a simple application—have you ever received a PDF file, one of those documents that opens up in Adobe Acrobat Reader? PDF files are a great way to send documents, especially proposals, because they look the same on any computer, anywhere, and they can't be changed. Most downloadable documents on the Internet use the PDF format. However, the software to create PDFs is pricy, starting at \$299 for Adobe Acrobat Standard. And there's a new version to buy every year! A cheaper alternative is the ASP version. Go to <http://www.adobe.com>, sign up for Adobe PDF Online—\$10/month, and create as many

PDFs as you like, as long as you continue your subscription.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. In fact, you can find ASPs for almost any type of software application. Let's explore some common services.

Time Tracking

How do you track time and expenses? Paper? An Excel spreadsheet? You can do better by choosing a web-based time-tracking system. Simple services provide basic data entry and reporting; more sophisticated options provide approvals, project costing, and invoicing features. [Http://www.ezwebtime.com](http://www.ezwebtime.com) is an inexpensive solution, at \$3-\$5/month, per user, and integrates directly with QuickBooks. A more robust tool that includes invoicing features is Timesolv, at <http://timebilling.elite.com>.

Contact Management And CRM

Ever been frustrated because your client contacts weren't synchronized with someone else in the office? Or maybe your contacts are on the computer—but you're out on the road. Managing contacts is key to bringing in revenue and maintaining good relationships, and easy access to this information is critical. Why bother synchronizing databases when you can all connect to a single database online, anywhere you have an Internet connection?

Both Act! and Goldmine, the most popular contact management products, have hosted versions. These don't have quite as many features as the traditional desktop versions, but there's no software to install and the database is easily shared, without the need for synchronizations.

If you want to move up from contact management to customer relationship management, try <http://www.salesforce.com>, or Siebel on Demand at <http://www.crmondemand.com>. Both tools integrate with Outlook; salesforce.com even syncs with your Palm, PocketPC, or BlackBerry. Check out the free trial subscriptions and online demos for more information on what these products can do for you.

Tools For Virtual Teams

In today's world, people often work together from different locations. If you don't have a VPN (virtual private network), how do you share files and stay productive? Try hosted collaboration tools. Just imagine—it's after midnight, and you realize you need to make some last-minute changes to the presentation for tomorrow's 8 a.m. meeting. Do you wake up your co-worker? No need—you simply log onto the team website and grab the latest version of the file.

Microsoft SharePoint is a hosted software application that allows teams to share files, contacts, calendars, lists, and documents online. [Http://www.hyperoffice.com](http://www.hyperoffice.com) is a similar product that includes web-based email.

For something truly different, try <http://www.jot.com>, a wiki-based tool that is easy, creative, and versatile. It's still in beta, so it's not quite ready for prime-time, but it's a sign of what's to come. (What's a wiki? Go to <http://www.wikipedia.org> and find out!)

Shipping Tools

Are you still going to the post office for stamps? There's no need. Try a site like

<http://www.stamps.com> or <http://www.endicia.com> for all your postage needs, or print out postage directly from the U.S. Post Office at <http://www.usps.com>. You can do the same at <http://www.fedex.com>, <http://www.ups.com>, and just about any other major shipper.

Online Backups

When was the last time you backed up your computer system? If you can't remember, it's been too long. But let's face facts—backups are a hassle, which is why so many of us don't bother. One of the easiest ways to create regular backups is with an online backup service like <http://www.idrive.com> or <http://www.connected.com>. These services automatically check your computer daily for changes, and they keep a copy of your files online for quick and painless recovery in the event of

problems. You are charged based on how much space you need, and prices start as low as \$3/month.

A Google Of Choices

So you like the idea of software rental. You want to get started. You go to Google and search for “application service provider,” and you get over 12 million results. What next?

First, look at your software “pain points”—where in your business do you need something better, faster, more efficient? This will help you pinpoint key areas to investigate—a CRM system, for example, or a collaboration tool.

Next, gather information on possible options. Talk to your peers and colleagues to see what they have tried and like. Check with your technology consultant for ideas.

Refer to industry publications for reviews. Try online demos and free trials.

Lastly, before you take the plunge, make sure the company you plan to work with will take good care of you. Security and support are critical—make sure your data is safe and that help is available when you need it. And even more importantly, confirm they are financially stable—if they go out of business, they take your rented software with them.

Now that you've done your homework, have you found something you like? Love the idea of no-hassle software? Then go online and start renting today!

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