



YOUR NEXT COMPUTER: THE WEB!

Office suites, e-mail, films, music, storage space, and even operating systems — everything is now available on the internet and you do not need to install any application on your computer, barring a browser. We are heading for an era when the **www will, in fact, be your desktop**

NIMISH DUBEY

More than a decade ago, the then CEO of Sun Microsystems and Microsoft-baiter Scott McNealy had stunned the world by announcing, "The network is the computer." His implication was simple: people would soon start doing everything on the internet, making their computers nothing but "dumb terminals" or devices whose only purpose was to access the internet — a bit like a vehicle that takes you to a place where you work. Although tech pundits made approving noises at that time, most computer users had greeted the statement with disbelief.

After all, that was the time when almost everything happened on the computer itself — if you wanted to work on a terminal, you needed to install software and ensure that your system had enough storage space, processor power and memory to run it. The internet and the web were places where you went in search of information — even e-mail was largely handled by clients like Eudora and MS Outlook Express. Internet access was erratic and slow, thanks to dial-up connections and the thought of working on a file on the internet, rather than on the hard drive of one's computer, seemed far-fetched, if not downright ridiculous.

CLOUD POWER: IT'S RAINING ONLINE APPS
Today, all that has changed. Many of us are, in fact, using the web — or web sites, if you prefer — for what we earlier used the computer's hard drive. For instance, many people actually upload their pictures on sites like

Picasa and Flickr and edit them online, instead of tweaking them using a software installed on their computers. Similarly, a number of people are also using Google Docs (online office suite) to compose, edit and share documents, spreadsheets and presentations instead of using traditional 'offline' software like MS Office and OpenOffice.org.

Microsoft seemed to acknowledge the growing importance of the internet when it added an online component to the latest version of its office suite, MS

Office 2010, allowing users to work on documents uploaded on the internet. Search giant Google is even working on an operating system called Chrome OS, which will largely work off the web, with the user only needing to install an operating system to start the computer and go online!

The entire phenomenon is called 'cloud computing', where information and applications reside not on individual computers, but on the 'cloud', a term used to refer to online space. And while the geek crowd will point out that online applications are nothing new, the fact is that it is only now that they have begun to gain popularity, thanks to improved connectivity and reduced costs of internet access. Users can now stay online for hours without running up a massive bill.

ONLINE WORK TOOLS

- **A good computer.** Online apps can work on just about any system, but the better the configuration of the machine, the better the performance. Even surfing the net requires some basic resources.
- **Compatible browsers:** To be on the safe side, stick to popular browsers like Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox and Google Chrome. You can rest assured that online app developers will make their apps work on the most-used browsers.
- **Plug-ins:** Many online applications use plug-ins like Javascript and Adobe Flash. Do keep these plug-ins updated on your browser for best online app performance.

SILVER LININGS

There are many benefits of doing things online. Most significantly, it reduces the pressure on your computer. You do not really have to worry if your system is powerful enough to run a particular software or a video game — all it has to do is be able to run an internet browser like Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox or Google Chrome and you can be fairly sure that, if your internet connection behaves, you will be able to work online. So you no longer have to worry as much about major hardware updates like changing processors, graphics cards or adding more memory — the web is your computer.

And because you can access the web from just about any computer with an internet connection, you are not restricted to a single computer. You can access your apps and information from your netbook, your office desktop or a PC in a cybercafe. And there are no compatibility issues either — an online app will generally work just as well on Windows, Mac or Linux.

Another advantage of cloud power is that it makes sharing information a lot easier. At the turn of the millennium, the only way you could show your photographs or videos to your friends was by either e-mailing them in the form of hefty attachments or by putting them on some portable storage media like a disk or CD. In the era of cloud computing, all one needs to do is park them on a web site — like Flickr, Google Docs — and share it with friends and colleagues.

Online applications are also a lot easier to use than the ones installed on computers. The reason is simple — the developers do not have as many system resources to play around with as they would have in an application that runs on a computer. That forces them to make software that are simpler and less resource-hungry. Many developers privately admit that it is easier to design an app that runs on a web site as compared to one that runs on a computer as they only have to keep the requirements of internet browsers in mind.

Then there is what many consider as the killer argument — most applications that run off the internet cost a lot lesser than their offline counterparts. Google Docs and Gmail are formidable online apps that cost nothing. Similarly, if all one is looking for is a few editing tweaks, then the online version of Photoshop (which is free) works out much cheaper than the version that one has to install on one's computer. There are fewer installation problems too.

...AND A FEW DARK ONES TOO

Cloud computing does have a flip side too. Experts say, with some justification, that online apps do not have as many features as those that run off desktops — MS Office does have many more features than Google Docs. Many

- **Good connectivity:** You need decent broadband connectivity to be able to make the most of online apps, so if you use a laptop, carry a high speed broadband data card around.
- **Offline backup options:** It sounds strange to recommend back up for stuff stored online, on a medium like a portable hard drive or a thumb drive, but it's always better to be safe than sorry. After all, bad things can happen to online services — there have been incidents where the most popular web sites have been down for hours because of hacker attacks and even of user data being compromised.



APPS ON THE NET

- **Glide OS:** <http://www.glideigital.com/>
An online working environment, complete with office suite and image editors, which you can access from just about any computer and even a number of handsets. The 30 GB free storage space thrown in can make hard disk obsolete.
- **Google Docs:** <http://docs.google.com/>
Google's online office suite lets you edit, compose, view and share documents, presentations and spreadsheets from within your browser. And the integration with Gmail is almost seamless.
- **Photoshop:** <https://www.photoshop.com/>
It is not really comparable with THE Photoshop that resides on your computer. But it provides enough editing options for the casual shutterbug and also throws in sharing and online storage options.
- **Snapfish:** <http://www.snapfish.com>
Photo printing comes to the cloud with Snapfish. The portal lets you order prints of the pictures that you have uploaded from within your browser — no printer or installed software necessary.
- **Quake Live:** <http://www.quakelive.com>
A variant of the massive successful Quake III: Arena video game, Quake Live runs totally off your web browser, allowing you to get a taste of some stunning, fast paced gaming action.

also warn of the security implications of leaving one's data and information on the internet, where they are at the mercy of unscrupulous hackers — one of the main reasons why a number of enterprises are still wary of cloud computing.

Finally, the total dependence on the internet is cited as one of the inherent weaknesses of the cloud — you need to be connected all the time. So your work could go for a loss if your service provider has an off day or if you get stuck in an area with no, or poor, connectivity. In their defence, online app exponents point out that all these shortcomings surely pale before the benefits that working on the cloud offers — less dependence on hardware, easier interfaces and lower costs. What's more, the extra features that most desktop applications come with are seldom, if ever, used by mainstream consumers looking for basic functionality rather than complex formatting options. As for security, well, careless usage of technology can endanger even those who do most of their work offline — all it takes is a virus on an unscanned USB flash drive or DVD to muck up matters.

All said and done, it does seem that the future seems to lie with working on the cloud rather than on the computer, given the kind of attention companies are paying to the online versions of their apps. Yes, online apps do need some refinement, but even today, a person with decent connectivity can do most of his or her work online from any computer.

The internet, the network or networks as some people call it, is well on course to becoming the desktop computer. And while some software manufacturers might not be overjoyed at the fact, we cannot hear too many complaints from consumers. Somewhere, Scott McNealy will be smiling. ■