



Case Study: Adapting to the New Mobile Workforce: Software-as-a-Service is an Enabler

By Joe Karbowski, Asure Software

Despite the news and buzz earlier this year when Yahoo! and Best Buy retracted their telecommuting programs, the fact remains that the workforce, in general, is becoming increasingly mobile, supported by a proliferation of smartphones, tablets, improved Wi-Fi access, and Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) technologies. In fact, IDC predicts the worldwide mobile worker population will exceed 2.3 billion by 2015.

Businesses that adapt now will be prepared for the workforce of the future, providing them with the tools to be both mobile and engaged. What's more, adopting comprehensive strategies to support telecommuting and remote staff can help organizations to realize significant savings in terms of real estate and workforce productivity, in addition to establishing a competitive edge for recruitment and retention.

How does the mobile trend apply to the SaaS movement? Cloud access removes the disruptions and barriers that can limit employee productivity and leave them feeling disengaged, and it provides all employees with access to the same information at the same time. This is key at a time when studies show employee engagement is running low and continues to present major challenges for HR.

Cloud-based products in human resource areas such as time and labor management or meeting and workspace reservation functions are excellent stepping stones for empowering the mobile workplace. For example, firmly entrenched, old-school labor technologies such as “punching the clock” are brought into the cloud by enabling employees to “check in” with their phone, and utilizing GPS and time stamps to replace a manual clock punch.

Corporate real estate initiatives that affect employees also can bring their own disruption to the status quo. Telecommuting (Yahoo! apparently aside), space reduction, and other optimization directives can unsettle the very space employees work in. Mobile-enabled cloud solutions can help to keep employees engaged during the transition by allowing them to find drop-in space, meeting rooms and other facility-related information in real-time. Need a space? Look at your phone. Want more details? Scan a QR code and get information on the spot.

Cloud Benefits for HR

Human resource information managers are increasingly turning to the cloud as a strategy to not only support mobile workers, but also a way to reap the benefits of always having the latest and greatest technology. Cloud solutions can minimize or eliminate the delays and frustrations of waiting for support from corporate IT, which may be overstretched due to a scarcity of skilled workers and assigning low priority to HR in relation to the organization's perceived mission-critical IT functions. The needs for IT support tend to grow as in-house solutions age and need more maintenance to keep pace with technology.

Another key benefit of a SaaS implementation for HR information managers is that almost all of the vendor's customers are running on the same software, and users can communicate with each other via customer forums and networks to share ideas and best practices, seek help and advice, etc. Conversely, a challenge with in-house software is that companies running on older or obsolete versions of a platform may be the “lone wolf,” with no one else to contact for questions or ideas. This ability to share and communicate with other users can help HR to be more self-sufficient and less reliant on corporate IT.

Considerations for a SaaS Implementation

Choosing a SaaS solution requires the same due diligence and research you would perform with any new software solution. Feature/function, integration capabilities, vendor viability and cost are just a few of the many traditional criteria. However, beyond the staples, there are additional key components you will want to review to ensure your overall project success. And while SaaS solutions should minimize reliance on corporate IT staff, collaboration is recommended to select a vendor and plan the initial

implementation. Here are some key factors to consider and address when planning an implementation:

- **User Management:** Depending on the scope of your rollout, you don't want yet another user database to maintain and update in HR, and your employees don't want to deal with yet another password. Avoid this productivity and buy-in sink by ensuring that your SaaS solution can integrate with the systems you have in place today.

Depending on where "employee lists" fall within your organizational departments (HR or IT are the most common), you may have solved this already with other application implementations. Determine whether you have a centralized employee database or where and how your data is maintained internally. Organizations that have gone through recent or frequent acquisitions may not have one employee list or "domain."

Collaborate with IT to ensure that you have the full picture. You should be able to assess if the SaaS vendor can meet your needs, whether it involves intimidating terms such as *multi-domain active directory lookup*, *single sign-on*, Web service imports or good old fashioned comma-separated values (CSV) file uploads. Integration with your existing infrastructure will spare the work of manual adjustments or updates for onboarding and offboarding staff.

- **Data Security:** No matter what solution you are looking to implement, there is certainly going to be data moving internally and externally. Depending on your industry, i.e., legal, medical, this can have legal and financial ramifications beyond a checkbox on a request for proposal.

Two common aspects of data security should be vetted: *data in motion* and *data at rest*. *Data in motion* refers to the security of data transmitted along a wire or via the cloud on a mobile phone. You'll see terms like "SSL" and "HTTPS" – ensure your vendor solution encrypts data transmission or else you could be liable for breaches. In a similar fashion, *data at rest* describes how the vendor secures data you finished working with and is stored in the application. Is the data, or at least sensitive data, encrypted? Is the data center itself secure? How many employees have access to your data, and how are they screened?

- **Privacy and Compliance:** Privacy and compliance rules are seemingly stamped on the coffee cups in HR these days – everyone needs to know. Even with increased visibility, organizations are still sometimes unclear about what constitutes *personally identifying information or data* (PII/PID). What data can be communicated with the SaaS solution and stay within your organizational guidelines? Name and e-mail are almost de facto requirements in any implementation. What else? What is the process for data sharing and compliance approval? Are waivers needed based on the data exchanged? Save yourself some time during the vendor review process and document your requirements up front.
- **Backups and Recovery:** Of course, any SaaS vendor worth their salt "backs up" your data. But, what does

that look like, and are there any service level agreements required on your end? This is another area where collaborating with internal IT can help you confirm if the vendor passes the "sniff test." Does the vendor architecture support easy isolation and restoration of your data, if required? In investigating one vendor in the past, we found them happy to tout their "multi-tenant" data store performance, only to later find out through investigation they couldn't actually restore just "our" data if the need arose.

- **Update Planning and Support:** As previously mentioned, a key beauty of SaaS solutions is that vendors focus on what's next rather than on maintaining multiple versions of old code and the "MacGyver" tactics to update older applications.

With quality SaaS vendors, updates and upgrades come at a steady, predictable flow. Be aware though – SaaS systems are going to roll forward whether you are ready or not. Find out from the vendor if they provide a schedule of updates or can provide you with their update history. What do they do to minimize the complexity so that little or no adjustment is required for users? What sort of materials and/or training do they provide to support the update? Ensure that you stay on top of release announcements and keep your user base apprised of any pending upgrades and associated new features.

Many excellent SaaS technologies are available that can help HR support an increasingly mobile workforce, enjoy the benefits of always-current technology, support productivity, enhance compliance, reduce employee fraud, and other positive measures – all with reduced reliance on corporate IT support. However, IT should be involved in selecting vendors and planning implementations to ensure that the new technology integrates with existing systems and does not compromise the organization's IT standards, and that the vendor is capable of delivering on its promises.

About the Author



As vice president of Technology and Development at Asure Software, Joe Karbowski is responsible for overseeing the development and delivery of all AsureSpace product lines. He also acts as a primary visionary for the division, guiding the strategic and technological roadmap. He joined Asure Software in 2002 when the company he co-founded, RedESoft, was acquired by Asure (then Meeting Maker, Inc.). Prior to RedESoft, he served as director of Development at enterprise resource planning vendor CMI. With more than 20 years of experience in product development and management in a variety of technologies, he has broad experience in bringing enterprise-scale software solutions to market. In addition to being a featured speaker at several national conferences, he has also published numerous articles on software development techniques and methodologies. He holds a B.S. in Computer Science from Michigan Technological University. He can be reached at JKarbowski@AsureSoftware.com.