

Critical Mission

If you would like to view previous newsletter articles, visit our web site at www.AltoConsulting.com.

FEATURED ARTICLE

By
Craig Yellick, Vice President



2011 - the Year of the Extranet *The Cloud is Calling*

*All of the key factors are in now in place: **price, feasibility, reliability.** 2011 is the year to get serious about extending your organization's reach and integrate and automate your external relationships. Better, faster, cheaper – it's all ready right now.*

Automation Outside

I think you'll agree that by now pretty much everything *inside* your organization that can be automated, has been automated. You're done typing invoices, writing checks and filing papers related to internal operations.

What about your interactions with customers, vendors, suppliers, contractors and other entities outside of your organization? If you're still printing and mailing, still fielding routine phone calls, still playing phone-tag to get status updates then you still have plenty of room to improve. It's time to give serious consideration to an **extranet** for streamlining and automating communications with customers, partners and others.

Barriers are Gone

The traditional barriers to a successful extranet are all but gone here in late 2010. The costs and technical expertise required to design and implement an extranet solution have fallen to the point that the smallest organization is now on an even footing with gigantic corporations.

Cloud computing has turned economies of scale on its head and puts smaller companies in a position to do more, more quickly, than larger enterprises.

Here's a concrete example: for **\$5.25 per month** per subcontractor you can give them all secure access to an extranet portal where they go to get assignments, work out scheduling conflicts and update you on status and problems.

Here's another: If you're only interested in out-going communications, for only **\$2 per month** per customer you can provide a secure extranet portal where they can go to see invoices, status updates and other communications.

All of this is accomplished through a cloud-based service where the servers, infrastructure, software licensing and so on are all bundled into that low per unit price. Totally predictable costs and complete reliability because the cloud service vendor handles those details.

The specific dollar figures quoted above are **the actual per-unit costs** for Microsoft's cloud-based portal solution, SharePoint Online.

Systems Integration is the Key

Success with an extranet comes from leveraging your existing investments in internal automation. Most of your key business data is already in electronic form, so the next step is straightforward: push it out to an extranet portal and let suppliers, contractors, customers and others interact with it.

Is This Secure? Who is in Control?

Access to information is controlled through the traditional account name and password sign-in process with which people are already familiar. As

with online banking, the connection is encrypted so information stays private.

Additionally, you're in control of who gets access to which accounts and even the specific information within an account. For example, your internal staff members could have access to only their accounts, while customers or vendors are further restricted to seeing only the specific portal associated with their company.

Even within a portal, different lists and document libraries can have separate access controls and permissions. For example, suppliers or contractors can add and edit "To Do" items and "Status Update" items, but might have read-only access to specifications or contacts.

Mobility Devices

One of the truly revolutionary aspects of an extranet is the now widespread availability of smart phones, tablets and other forms of mobility devices with Internet connectivity. Anyone on the road, at a job site, working from home, stuck in traffic... anytime, anywhere access to critical business information is possible. All you need to do is get your data OUT there were it can be used.

Summary

It's all in place, ready to go as soon as you are: inexpensive extranet portals for streamlined and automated communications with the outside world.

If you're curious about SharePoint Online or Business Productivity Online Suite and want to learn more, Alto offers a training class designed to get you up to speed, fast on the concepts and address all your questions and concerns.

<http://www.altoconsulting.com/Training/Courses/Micro-soft-Business-Productivity-Online-Suite.aspx>

Contact Alto if you'd like a demonstration of any of the products or techniques discussed in this article. Our next solution briefing is devoted to these concepts.