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Running Our Business on Cloud Nine

Getting Rid of All Hard Drives and Servers Has Freed us up to be More Productive

By Jeremy Martin, CGB, CGP, GMB

When we launched our firm in January 2010, we made an early commitment to go completely paperless, which we reported on in the October issue, page 19. Once fully implemented, the results were immediate and exciting — anytime, anywhere access to information, ease of collaboration and efficiency gains for our entire staff.

Our early efforts at running our paperless firm utilizing traditional desktop software were effective. We operated under this paradigm for the better part of two years. We did feel, however, that it was a half measure. The next logical step for us to ease the IT burden, grow more easily, collaborate more freely and get more mobile, was to transition our desktop computing paradigm into the cloud.

Over the long Thanksgiving 2011 weekend, we took our entire company off-line. Thursday morning, while my family cooked an epic Thanksgiving feast, I dismantled our entire IT infrastructure. Goodbye Microsoft Exchange Server and all of your complexity; say hello to Google Apps for Business. See you later file server; welcome Box.com. Thanks for all the memories QuickBooks Pro, you've been replaced by Microsoft Project with the very slick, inexpensive, completely Web-based SmartSheets; we are now a QuickBooks Online shop. Even our construction management software, which houses all of our estimating, purchasing, invoicing and job-costing functions, runs exclusively on a Web browser now. You name it, we replaced it. We cleaned house.

On Sunday night I opened a Web browser on my home computer and ran

every system in our company. When we reported back to work on Monday morning, we deleted software off office computers and field laptops. When we hired a new employee, our IT procedure was outrageously simple. Buy a laptop, launch a browser, bookmark a few pages and provide passwords. I recently put our newest project manager online, with full access to company systems, in less than an hour.

These benefits also extended to our mobile enterprise. Many of the tools we migrated to had native iPhone/iPad/Android apps, or ran well on mobile-based browsers. Our office-based staff embraced the change and our field team saw immediate benefits.

From a risk management standpoint, our business was no longer one failed hard drive away from disaster. In 12 years of running remodeling and custom home building businesses, I've endured no less than seven catastrophic hard drive failures. Now if we lose a hard drive, we shrug it off. We buy another laptop, open a browser and get back to work.

I see our project managers using their laptops less and their iPhones more. I no longer lug a laptop home to work at night; I just launch a Web browser from my home computer, or grab my iPad, and I have access to everything.

For the tools where we've made the switch, there is no doubt — the suite of cloud-based tools are deserving of the hype. Whether we are trying to share contacts, or calendars, approved vendor invoices or archive email — all these tasks are easier and less expensive in the cloud.

And the speed of innovation is startling. Several of our Web-based tools are adding features and upgrades so fast we can barely keep up. Just when we start to settle into these tools, they launch some new feature. It forces us to keep pushing the boundaries, learning new skills, improving the way we do business and evolving our systems and processes. I'll admit it can be painful — our systems are in flux, constantly being

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refined. But that's a good problem to have. It's the pain of progress. It's the burden of continuous improvement.

All tough decisions we face as business owners tend to have the most long-term value. Ditching our software and moving completely into the cloud was one of those decisions for us. Our entire extended team is reaping the benefits. We collaborate more, and more quickly, and our performance is improving, all the while saving money and requiring less time to manage the infrastructure. Like the day we went paperless, we've never looked back. |QR



Jeremy Martin, a third-generation contractor, graduated from the University of Texas with a bachelor's degree in engineering with high honors. He is chair of the Austin Area Remodelers Council and member of Home Builders Association of Greater Austin board of directors.