The Not-So-Silver Lining of Cloud Computing: Intuit Goes Dark for Two Days, Giving Pause to the Small Business Owner

NORWALK, Conn., June 21 (SEND2PRESS NEWSWIRE) — Things did not go as planned when Joe Presto of the Norwalk-based IT consulting firm Desktop Guerrillas tried to send out his monthly invoices last Tuesday night. After error messages kept popping up, Presto did a Google search and quickly determined that the issue was with Intuit’s system, not his own. The next morning he learned the full scope of the outage: 300,000 of Intuit’s clients had been affected, most using online versions of office mainstays like TurboTax®, QuickBooks®, and QuickBase®.

Desktop Guerrillas’ clients could certainly wait for their bills, and Presto was able to get them out later in the week, but the outage had a far more debilitating effect on some other users relying on Intuit’s products, which provide critical line-of-business applications. As the comments on Intuit’s blog in reaction to its apology indicated, an extended outage like this can cripple a business.

Intuit’s trip-up is the downside of what many IT professionals dub the “Year of the Cloud,” in which more and more companies have moved their services to third party providers rather than running them in-house. Joe Presto is not surprised by the outage, nor the outrage. “To many businesses, ‘The Cloud’ is a magic place where issues and maintenance are a thing of the past,” he says. “In reality, these services can be just as prone to outage as an internally-run product.”

He brings up several points to consider:
How resilient is your cloud service’s infrastructure? “Clouds are a perfect description to these outsourced services,” says Presto. “Because there’s typically zero visibility into their architecture and operation.” A sharp web page or even a trusted name can easily mask a poorly implemented service, as Intuit’s case last week showed. “As Intuit described it, an accidental power failure brought down main and backup systems and resulted in a two-day outage,” says Presto. “This begs the question of why a backup system was so closely linked with the primary system. And why would a power outage take so long to recover from? That’s not to say that clients that host their own servers are without danger, but at least it’s within their control to design a disaster recovery plan.”

This raises another question: How safe is your data? “Clients who use hosted applications need to assume that their data could very easily be gone tomorrow and they should plan accordingly,” says Presto, a former IBMer who started Desktop Guerrillas in 2004. Many cloud vendors, he says, don’t provide an easy way to export data, which could represent a major exposure.
“If businesses don’t have a way to personally ensure the availability of their data, they may want to look at other solutions,” Presto states. “For instance, although our ticket management system is hosted, we download data at least twice a day. Losing that data could cost us tens of thousands of dollars, so we guard it with our lives.”

Still, cloud computing is not all doom and gloom. “Cloud services can provide great value and are a valued part of any solution we provide to our clients, but we don’t make any claims about availability that the cloud vendor won’t back up with a service level agreement. The false sense of security can result in a business whose core processes are less protected than if they offered them in-house.”

About Desktop Guerrillas:
Desktop Guerrillas provides IT support to small and midsize businesses in Fairfield County, Connecticut. More information can be found at www.desktopguerrillas.com.

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