Server-Based Software versus Web-Based Software: Feeling Out a Viable Solution
Brian Porter, President of Soft-Pak, discusses the pros and cons of server-based and web-based software for the waste industry and the steps to transition.

What is the more common type of system currently being used? What is the alternative? Is it more efficient?

Server based software is still the majority of deployed applications; but we have seen web based (also known as "Cloud Computing") systems chosen 4-1 for new client implementations.

Both server and web based software perform well; but costs, deployment times and required IT resources need be considered. From an efficiency standpoint, it is difficult to beat the easy deployment and lower operational cost associated with web based software.

Discuss server-based software and its pros and cons. Do most people in the industry think it is outdated? What were the negatives that made companies/users look to a different type of solution?

It depends on who you talk to; server-based technology has been the traditional way to deliver software programs for the past 30 years. This will never go away, but the new web based alternatives makes sense for a lot of business. Based on client feedback, the 'pros' for server based software are performance and reliable access to corporate information. However, with the price of internet access continually declining while becoming more reliable.... we are seeing these perceived 'pros' come under attack.

The waste business is not a bleeding edge technology business. Clients want reliability at an affordable price. Server based solutions are not outdated; there just might be a more efficient way to run your business..... and by the way, it's less expensive, more reliable and improves your data security.

The increased start up and operational costs appear to be the main 'cons' with traditional server based solutions. You constantly need to upgrade hardware and manage your systems. With web based software, you eliminate 30% of the cost.... the hardware. You eliminate 50% of the headaches... .the hardware. I can not think of one client who has moved to a web based software solution and later moved back to server based. It just does not happen. When you save money, lower you're operating expenses and provide more value, it's difficult to argue with that model. With more corporations implementing web based software application, the overall cost differences is becoming much easier to calculate.

Discuss web-based software and its pros and cons. How long has it been around? How was it developed? Why is it a better alternative? What are the elements that make it the preferred method? What size of business is it more suitable for?

Web-based software has been around for 20+ years; the original name was ASP "application service provider". I initially heard the term 'cloud computing' about five years ago, but realized this is just another vernacular for delivering software via the web. Large-scale deployment and acceptances of web based software has been in full force for more than 10 years. Innovative companies like Google and SalesForce.com pioneered the 'cloud' environment; and now Microsoft, HP, Oracle, IBM and Intel are all focusing the majority of their attention on 'cloud' deployments.
In a competitive world like waste hauling, the operations that are thriving are efficient and leveraging their investments. That is the big advantage with web based software, you no longer pay for hardware, you no longer support hardware, you only pay for what you use and you increase your reliability and security. I would say web based software is ideally suited for small to mid-size organizations, but we have seen larger $100M+ multi-site operations easily migrate from a server based solution to our web based solution with zero downtown. The results have been huge costs savings within their IT budgets, a more robust security measure and a disaster recovery plan that has been tested and would have costs tens of thousands to implement.

What are the steps to transitioning a business from a server to web-based? Are there any pre-cautions or things one has to keep in mind or prepare for before beginning the changeover? Does the transition change with regards to business size?

The process of transitioning from server to web-based depends if you are switching programs. If you are staying within the same program, simply export your data and the switch is negligible. Soft-Pak clients who have performed this transition typically do the switch late on a Friday and the customer service representatives start early Monday morning with no re-training. Our conversion team performs a number of tests before 'going live', but we generally have it down to a simple routine at this point.
If you are switching software programs, that is another story. Data conversions, training of users and management reports need to be taken into consideration. Depending on the size and complexity of the operation, a waste hauler can be converted, trained and up and running inside 60 to 120 days.

Ultimately, explain why web-based software is easier on companies and their budgets, etc.

It goes back to costs, reliability and security. With a web-based application, 95 percent of the time you will lower your start up and operational costs, improve data reliability while implementing a solid overall data security plan. It's that simple, get a lot more and pay less for it.
There are always exceptions to the rule, but use common sense when researching a vendor. A software company's might claim to offer "web based software" but buyer beware. Don't place the reliability of your business with an outfit that is located in hurricane alley in Florida; secure & reliable data centers are key.

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Case Study: Marin Sanitary Services
Marin Sanitary Services is an existing Soft-Pak customer who supports 30,000+ customers, a transfer station and an MRF. Marin suffered a critical hardware failure to the main production server that handled all operational actives. Their scale houses could not produce tickets so they were forced to perform manual updates. Marin operates a busy public MRF and they needed to have scale tickets up and running ASAP. To expedite the change to the Soft-Pak web based solution, Marin express delivered their existing backup tapes with hopes of immediately restoring service.

The initial concern was the ability to get Marin back on line as soon as possible. Given the tape delivery at 8am the following day, the Soft-Pak IT and conversion team went to work and had the scale operating via the web within a few hours. Eventually Soft-Pak restored the entire date files and full service was restored for management and customer service representatives.

Coincidently, just weeks prior to the hardware failure, Marin's management has been reviewing the pros and cons of switching from server based to web based. The unfortunate hardware failure expedite their long term decision process as Marin immediately knew they did not want to be in the hardware / data storage business any longer. Since the switch to web based delivery, Marin has not been down once and they continue to grow their business while adding new Soft-Pak software modules to better service their customers. Marin has seen a decrease in capital expenditures relating to software and hardware support given the web based implementation.

Soft-Pak has been providing waste and recycling software solution for more than 25 years, offering solutions for both small and large hauling operations. Their software is licensed via a server or web based solutions. Soft-Pak continues to be the leading choice for waste and recycling companies throughout North America.