More Than Just Hype
How cloud-based applications will change the game

by Jochen Bartlau, combit Software

Remember those days when you used to take your USB stick with you anywhere you went? You still do? Synchronizing your media files or personal documents on all devices, whether it’s your smartphone, PC, home server or NAS can be a royal pain in the neck. Enter cloud-based storage services such as Dropbox or Windows Live SkyDrive – it’s a whole different story. They make synchronizing your files automatically on almost any device a breeze. It’s so hard to imagine that I used to carry my scrapbook around, where now I just open up the Evernote smartphone app and start working away. In fact, as I’m typing this article, I’m sitting in front of an Evernote browser tab continuing the work I had started on the commute home.

Using these cloud services is a no-brainer for anyone working seriously in the IT sector and will become mainstream before long. I am convinced that local storage becomes less important and the convenience of having your data with you everywhere will dramatically change the way we work and think. With the advent of Windows 8 and its deep SkyDrive integration that was announced at the BUILD conference this year, consuming cloud storage services will become a first-class citizen in the operating system. Every Windows user will get his own private cloud storage, and using Live Connect and the Live SDK, you will be able to easily cloud-enable applications. This will be another boost for the trend.

Most services available today offer an easy-to-use interface to consume them from your own applications. Existing applications can easily leverage the advantages of cloud services and extend them through new functionality. And the best thing about it is: You don’t have to invent the next Twitter to jump on this bandwagon; just combine what’s there at your disposal.

A good starting point is writing cloud applications using the Windows Azure platform or any of the other available cloud-hosting services. You gain the immediate advantage that these apps easily scale to your needs. Whether it’s a sharp performance peak while doing the statistics and reports for the next Olympic Games or a month-to-month increase in your web app’s popularity, with the click of a finger you get the workforce you require. The learning curve is flat as you can use almost all of the tools you used in those good old WinForms days. Your code doesn’t mind if it runs on your machine or at some remote datacenter.

The data can live in the cloud as well; Azure SQL is a safe and easily integrated way to access SQL data from almost any client and device. If you need to be able to easily change the schema without taking your app offline or get rid of the schema all together, make sure to look at document-based NoSQL databases like CouchDB or MongoDB. If you want to offer document collaboration, integrate Microsoft SharePoint services that allow for browser-based editing of Microsoft Office documents.

Once your application is state-of-the-art, you’ll be able to adopt the next trend once it emerges. This might easily be the logon via LiveID announced for Windows 8. Application states can then be serialized to the cloud. That is, a user can start to work at his or her office PC, continue at exactly the same place on a tablet PC on the train and finish the job later on at home. The data and UI of the applications will be migrated to any of the devices, enabling a seamless transition between them. Even the desktop can live in the cloud, no matter where in the world you logon you’ll always have all your tools and apps at your disposal.

It’s an exciting time to be a software developer.

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