

Webware ROI

History Repeats Itself

Two decades ago, mainframe and mid-range computer makers sat idly by as PCs emerged and eventually dominated the IT market. This author sold midrange systems for a large computer company in the 1980s. At one client site, my \$120,000 midrange solution went head-to-head against something called a local area network (LAN). I had vaguely heard of LANs and the company that eventually dominated that market, Novell. As my father used to say, I was about to “get my head whapped” in a big way.

LAN Beats Midrange, Lesson Learned

I lost that bid. The solution presented by my competitor offered similar functionality at one third the cost of my solution. I hated losing at the time. But in hindsight I must say that the client made a good decision. IT must serve business goals, and it's all about ROI.

The Lesson Repeats

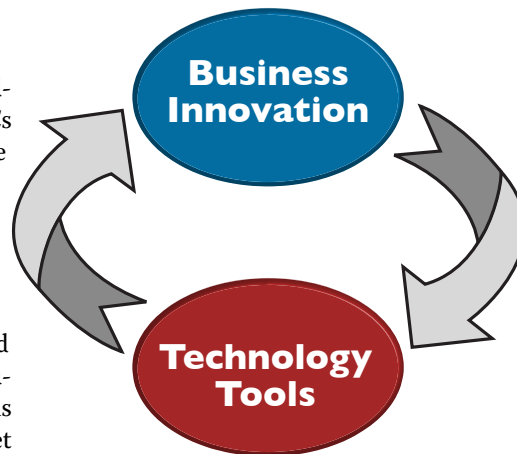
LAN applications challenged mainframes back in the 1980s. Now LAN apps are stalked in an aggressive way by newer Web technologies.

Pundits have many names for the new stuff: Web-based apps, Web 2.0, Software as a Service (SaaS), and so on. Of course, the name we choose is not as important as what the application does and how it serves your business. IT must serve business goals.

One thing these new buzzwords all have in common: They all involve some aspect of the Web. For this article, we will use the term Webware, as coined by the team at CNet and Webware.com.

Because It's the Web? No.

Let's not get hung up on the idea of doing Web based software just because it's



Cycle of Achievement

- Business innovation drives technology.
- Technology enables more business innovation.
- ROI increases and everybody wins.

on the Web. There's a perverse human tendency (especially among tech people) to gravitate to something new regardless of how useful it really is.

The most important statement in IT: Information technology must serve business goals. Technology for technology's sake might be cool, but it's not necessarily the best path to positive ROI.

Cycle of Achievement

Companies are always looking for ways to boost revenue. The most successful companies do this through business innovation: Creating newer & better ways to keep their customers happy and coming back for more.

Technology is an enabler for innovative ideas. For example, book stores sold books in the same way for thousands of years until Amazon.com turned the business model on its head. Borders and Barnes & Noble had to step up or die. Web technology changed the book business forever.

At the same time, the book business drives Internet technology. As more people purchase online, our need for tougher security increases.

So business innovation drives technology, and technology drives business innovation. It's a powerful cycle of achievement. Everybody wins.

Webware is a recent result of this cycle. Business needed better tools, and technology has stepped up to deliver.

Before Webware

Most business software today is designed to run in a client/server environment. A chunk of the software sits on each user's workstation (client) and it communicates with a chunk of software somewhere on the network (server). The problem: In order to make the software work, a tech must install the client-side software on each and every machine on the network. This is a very time consuming process.

When it's time to update client/server software, the tech must first update the server, and then update every client on the network. A special version of the software must be written for each type of client (PC, Mac, Linux, PDA). Or the IT department must force all users to run the same platform, typically Microsoft Windows.

Webware is Different

Webware is designed to operate within a simple Web browser. If the software is written properly, any computer that runs a Web browser gets to use the software. Some browsers even run on hand-held personal digital assistants (PDAs).

The server software is written to work like the Web sites that people use every day, with one key difference: business logic is built into the site. The business

logic can be designed for any of several functions, including accounting, customer relationship management, scheduling... anything that the business needs. And if it's web-based, any user running a proper web browser can be productive.

Easy Installation & Updates

Installation and updates are easy because every machine sold today comes with a pre-installed Web browser. So when it's time to install a workstation, you unpack it from the box and plug it into the network. That's it. No client-side software to install. And if the software breaks, move to another browser-equipped PC. As far as webware software is concerned, every PC (or Mac or Linux box) is the same.

Try Webware Now

If you've ever used Web-based email offered by Gmail, Yahoo, or Hotmail, then

you've had a glimpse of Web-based software. You can run a Web-based word processor or spreadsheet at <http://docs.google.com>. Yet all of these only scratch the surface of what this technology has to offer.

Where's the Data?

That depends. Some businesses choose to put the server for their Webware in-house. Others choose a hosting service. That decision largely depends on the technical skill-set within your company, the speed of your Internet connection, and the amount of time your team spends using the data outside the office. There are several "right" answers.

Suggested Reading

<http://wikipedia.org>, specifically the Web Application article.

Suggested DVD

Triumph of the Nerds, narrated by Robert X. Cringely. Available at Amazon.com. Favorite quote by Oracle's Larry Ellison: "It's bits. You don't but bits in plastic, plastic in a box, drive the box to the store and put it on a shelf. It's bits. You put bits on the Internet so people can download the bits."

About the Author

Raymond T. Hightower is the president of Wisdom Consulting Group, a Chicago-based information technology firm. Wisdom creates information technology solutions for growing businesses. For more information, visit www.wisdomgroup.com.

Webware or Client/Server: Which is Better?

It depends. What's important to you might not be as important to someone in a different industry.

Here are a few criteria to consider.

Webware	Traditional Client/Server	Comments
Maintain one server. Users connect through a standard web browser.	Maintain one server plus every PC (client) that connects to it.	Maintaining each workstation means extra time spent by an expensive IT professional.
If a user's workstation breaks, immediately move to any other machine since all PCs today come with a web browser.	If a user's workstation breaks, move to another machine. And then call the IT department to install the client side of the application.	With greater flexibility, downtime is reduced and your people are more productive.
When it's time to upgrade, apply the upgrade to the server and that's it.	When it's time to upgrade, apply the upgrade to the server and each client.	There are ways to accelerate client upgrades. Still, each machine must be "touched" by an IT person in the client/server environment. This costs time.
Developers write one piece of software to run on the server. Then, users connect to the app using Windows, Mac, Linux, or any other operating system with a web browser.	Developers write one piece of software to run on the server. Then developers write a separate piece of software for each client (Windows, Mac, Linux, etc) that will connect to the app.	Fewer platforms means shorter development time. Shorter development time means lower cost. Fewer pieces means fewer opportunities for bugs to creep into the application.
Any user with a standard web browser can use a well-written web-based software application.	No matter how well the app is written, only machines specifically targeted by the developer will be able to connect.	Simplicity means lower costs, fewer bugs, and less time spent fixing the bugs that arise.
While not in its infancy, the web-based software industry still shows the erratic changes of adolescence. Every few months there's a new buzzword!	Client/server apps have been around for decades and are less subject to change. Less change means stability.	The client/server methodology is potentially more stable because it's been around longer.