

No Panic Computing sees itself at forefront of laptop as a service

September 8th, 2008

Source: CBC.ca

The Canadian Press

MONTREAL -- The shattering jar of a laptop hitting pavement, a cup of coffee elbowed onto a keyboard or the forgotten computer bag driving away in the back seat of a taxi - all are disasters that usually add up to lost or compromised data and heart palpitations for business managers great and small.

These situations might be catastrophes to some, but to No Panic Computing they're bread and butter.

The Toronto-based company offers what some believe is a novel and trend-setting service: secure, fully backed-up laptops that can be replaced complete with the data that was on them before they accidentally met with a bad end.

Norm Trainor, CEO of the Covenant Group in Toronto, had the kind of experience that No Panic stakes its reputation on. Trainor had his laptop bumped at a U.S. airport and it crashed to the ground, its screen shattering - he called No Panic right away.

"They had replaced the notebook by noon the next day," said Trainor, whose company specializes in increasing helping organizations grow their market share and increase productivity.

"Everything that I had on the notebook up until the time I put it in my case and got on the plane was saved," he said.

Without the service, Trainor said he would have had to take the time to buy a new laptop, have it reconfigured and his out-of-office work would have been lost.

That's precisely the kind of situation No Panic CEO Larry Keating envisioned when he started the business.

With two decades of experience in the information technology outsourcing business, his idea was to offer secure computer notebooks and their upkeep as a service.

After research and a pilot project to find out what business owners wanted in a laptop, Keating said most responded: "I just want someone to plunk down a computer in front of me and I want it to work. ...I want to go to somebody who knows it and can fix it and can make it work."

To do this, he said he needed to make the technology as "bulletproof" but also as simple as possible.

Keating went after small and medium-sized businesses, especially the ones with about 10 to 25 employees, figuring many didn't have computer technicians on staff and had enough to look after without adding another responsibility.

"We're trying to draw our customers away from that do-it-yourself world," said Keating.

He successfully sought out HP as the laptop supplier and added chip maker Intel and data security firm Iron Mountain as partners. Research In Motion (TSX:RIM) was an inspiration, and Keating envisioned laptops that work as seamlessly as the BlackBerry smartphone.

"You buy it and you see the top of the technology only and you get to use it," he said in an interview.

No Panic offers 24/7 support, backup, security, encryption and accidental damage protection for about \$130 a month per laptop over a three-year lease.

Keating said notebooks are configured for each user and No Panic's backup "keeps nine copies deep of every file and the current file you are working on is forever."

He said his research also showed that security is a priority with 80 per cent of those he had surveyed had no encryption on their company laptops.

"We've been on the phone with small businesses who call after the fact. It's heartbreaking. They call and say we hear you are in the secure notebook business. They say, 'We gotta get the data back.'"

The concept isn't entirely new and there have been American companies that offered similar services, but Lance Ulanoff, editor-in-chief of the PCMag Network, noted that No Panic's "comprehensive service is a little bit more unusual" and could be at the tip of a new trend in business computing.

"It seems to align pretty nicely with the whole idea of software as a service and 'cloud' computing where the onus for managing your data and choosing and buying applications shifts from the client and the business to the 'cloud' or the service," Ulanoff said from New York.

"And that's kind of taking the weight or the pressure off the small businesses and even larger companies. This idea that everything can be a service right down to the hardware that you use is pretty compelling to people."

No Panic Computing now has 42 employees and is part of Markham, Ont.-based Keating Technologies Inc., which brings technology products to businesses and consumers. Keating said he would like to hire another 40 people by the end of next March.

Keating said he has about 200 customers in North America and believes he is at the forefront in offering the computer notebook as a service.

But Ulanoff said the service could limit choice, since what's usually offered is a standard computer notebook - with not much choice in terms of screen size, for example.

"They say they have 24/7 service so in theory there's no downside, but the biggest downside is that you're not choosing your services," said Ulanoff.

"You're choosing them and they are choosing the services. If you grow enamoured of any part of that program and No Panic decides 'We're switching,' you have to switch with them."