

TECH GLOSSARY

Technology Guide for Small and Midsize Businesses

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Use this glossary as your reference to common business technology terms

Application

A software program engineered to perform business tasks(s). Applications can be built from scratch, purchased off the shelf, or a combination of the two.

Application Server

An application server is (usually modular) software that provides deployment and management infrastructure for your software applications. In other words, it allows you to centrally develop (if needed), deploy, integrate, and manage all your business systems. For that reason, an app server makes the process of adding new systems or interconnecting and managing older ones much less complex than it would otherwise be. See the “What is an Application Server?” Technology Guide for more information.

Availability

Refers to the amount of time a software application can be accessed by internal or external users. For applications that are business-critical, near-100% availability (or “uptime”) is the expected goal.

Business Intelligence

A solution-oriented process in which raw data (such as customer transactions) is analyzed for the purposes of “decision support”— to give business decision-makers hidden information about customer behavior or tendencies that affect the business. The Business Intelligence lifecycle spans data integration and cleansing, analysis, presentation, and feedback.

Commodity Computing

Refers to the use of low-cost, off-the-shelf hardware components for information storage and processing needs. Recently commodity hardware from vendors such as Dell has become a viable, cost-effective alternative to traditional high-end hardware for many businesses.

Clustering

Connecting two or more computers together in such a way that they appear to be a single computing resource. Clusters are used to increase the performance and availability of the applications running on them. Clustering is a popular strategy for implementing grid computing, since it is relatively easy to add new CPUs

simply by adding a new server or blade to the overall cluster. Clusters are typically transparent to users and applications.

Collaboration

The process in which disparate workers rely on common IT infrastructure to communicate and share information, often in real time. Examples of collaboration infrastructure include email, calendaring, and web conferencing.

Consolidation

The process in which data that is dispersed across many databases is centralized in a single managed, secure, and scalable server. Consolidation typically lowers overhead significantly, as fewer assets need to be managed by fewer resources.

Database

Literally, a managed repository of customer and/or business information. When consolidated into a centralized database, business data is secure, available, and manageable. (See **Relational Database**.)

Distributed Computing

Multiple computing resources networked together to solve a computing task.

Grid

Computational components—servers, networks, storage, and information—acting together to create one or more large pools of computing resources. Using a grid, an organization can dynamically align its IT resources with business needs.

Identity Management

The centralized, secure administration of the entire lifecycle of all users and entities that access a network. For growing businesses with increasing numbers of employees and applications as well as increasing amounts of data that need to be secured, identity management can be a big timesaver.

Integration

The process of interconnecting data and applications across a department or entire organization. (An application server is one means of achieving integration.) A lack of integration usually results in redundant, expensive, and overly complex infrastructure.

Linux

Linux is a free operating system created by Linus Torvalds with help from developers around the world. Developed under the GNU General Public License, Linux source code is freely available to everyone. Thousands of organizations and individuals have released their own versions of operating systems based on the Linux kernel, but the two most significant players are Red Hat and SUSE.

Middleware

Middleware is a generic term for any piece of software that sits between a front-

end software application and a back-end database, application servers being the most common example.

Packaged Business Applications

Off-the-shelf and (typically) modular software that enable operational processes such as accounting, inventory management, and customer relationship management, and which are often customized for vertical industries. Packaged business applications rely heavily on the capabilities of a relational database and application server; for that reason, close integration between the three is highly desirable. Most small-to-midsize businesses find the costs of purchasing and implementing packaged applications much lower than developing their own from scratch. See the “Evaluating Packaged Business Applications” Technology Guide for more information.

Relational Database

A type of database in which data is stored in rows and columns, enabling data access through a standardized language called SQL. Relational databases (or relational database management systems; RDBMSs) are inherently more scalable than the nonrelational variety. See the “What is a Relational Database?” Technology Guide for more information.

Scalability

Refers to the ability of a server to answer requests on an increasingly frequent basis in a predictable manner. For example, a scalable database will accommodate a larger and larger number of simultaneous users with few or no performance implications.

Server

A computer resource in a network that is shared by multiple users. The term can refer either to a specific piece of hardware or a software process, such as “database server” or “Web server.”

Standards

Just like in any other industry, a reliance on standards will ensure that your systems always remain “open” (i.e., possible to integrate with other standards-based systems), that human resources with the proper skill set will be plentiful, and that vendor “lock in” is difficult or impossible.

Systems Management

The ability to manage and administer all software, hardware, and network assets in a partially automated and proactive manner. Systems management is usually performed through a browser-based console that provides a bird’s-eye view of your infrastructure’s performance and availability.

Web Conferencing

A form of collaboration technology that enables individuals or groups to meet, interact, present and collaborate with others online, in real time, with just a Web browser and a phone.

Web Services

Web services are modular, reusable applications that communicate over the Web, or internally within an organization, to perform specific business functions. Based on a set of standard messaging protocols, Web services are platform- and technology-independent and can be linked together easily. Some examples of Web services include: an insurance company's claim-processing application, a shipping company's package-tracking application, and an application that connects a rental car company's mainframe reservation system with its airline business partners.