

# WHY SINGAPORE SCHOOLS CHOSE THE PUBLIC CLOUD

By Kelly Ng | 22 December 2009

The head of Ministry of Education's (MOE) IT department has detailed reasons why the agency is forging ahead with plans to use Google Apps, in addition to a parallel move to standardise the Ministry's operating environment, known as the 'SOE (Schools)' project. Speaking exclusively to FutureGov, Lim Teck Soon, IT Director of MOE, explained that the need to quickly roll-out new email, messaging and collaboration applications was the key driver.

"We went ahead with the launch of a messaging system because we believe there is an urgent need for a resilient and scalable system to be ready in case of emergency when the messaging system becomes a critical component among teachers to interact and collaborate," explained Lim. "Messaging is an optional item within the SOE (Schools) contract which is up for tender. In the event we are not satisfied with the current service provider, we will still have the option to leverage the SOE (Schools) platform for messaging."

The MOE is the first education ministry in South East Asia to adopt an open standard cloud computing platform. This decision reflects the different requirements of its education end-users.

By the end of this month (December), more than 30,000 teachers and staff from over 350 schools would have started using the Google Apps (Education version) suite of online communications and collaboration services. Teachers will be able to use web 2.0 based applications to interact, collaborate and teach anywhere and anytime via the internet.

MOE hopes that the improved features – such as a global address book of teachers, calendaring, instant messaging, flagging of emails for follow-up, email to-do lists and so on – will encourage greater usage and improve teaching efficiency.

A study on user requirements revealed that the usage pattern for email among teachers and staff has dramatically increased, according to Lim. "We had to upgrade our hardware so regularly and we felt it was not sustainable. Instead of depending on our internal environment and continually adding hardware, we wanted to leverage cloud computing technology to allow for this growth," he said. Google provided bigger email disk space size of 7GB, up from 110MB provided by MyEDUmail2, the previous email system.

Built on a distributed cloud computing platform, the system gives the flexibility to scale up seamlessly to cater for unforeseen increases in usage. Lim cited a possible emergency scenario where schools were to close. "Scaleability to the highest number of concurrent users is an important feature when we evaluated the various solutions and the ability for schools to communicate to teachers and for teachers and students to communicate and collaborate are very critical during emergency," he added.

Many government agencies have yet moved into the public cloud due to security risks. This was definitely part of MOE's consideration. "We weighed security concerns against the benefits of flexibility and scalability. After careful analysis of the sensitivity of data, we found the security level provided by the system to be acceptable," said Lim.

At FutureGov's Government Cloud Forum last month (November), Dr Lee Hing Yan, Programme Director – National Grid Office, commented: "Where there are situations where it is useful, government will go into the cloud. Applications which are classified as restricted or below are likely to use the public cloud. While applications which are data sensitive or confidential will be put on hold until the public cloud can fulfil the necessary government requirements."

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