

The Next Internet Revolution Isn't What You Think

William J. Dragon

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Ask any automobile dealer, insurance broker, or retail store manager what has been the single greatest threat to their margins and the answer will most assuredly come back: *the Internet*. The greater transparency of information and competition engendered by the Internet has transformed some industries for the better (who actually still goes to their local bank branch?), while leaving others in tatters (when was the last time you booked a vacation through a travel agent?).

But just as the dawning of the 21st century saw the Internet dramatically lower, and in some cases dismantle, traditional barriers to entry in a variety of industries, as this decade comes to a close, a new generation of web-technologies threaten to shake-up and squeeze yet another industry: enterprise software.

By now, everyone has heard of 'cloud' computing, a concept based upon the conceit that our work need not be tethered to an individual computer or operating system when a universally accepted web-standard allows otherwise. And while many would argue that the Cloud is the future of computing (Google has even recently announced a browser-based operating system called 'Chrome' that presumably will support accessing applications in the Cloud), Cloud computing's ascension as a feasible alternative will likely be delayed until cheap, high-speed, internet access is as ubiquitous as running water and electricity. Until that time, broad proliferation of Cloud computing will remain a dream.

So if Cloud computing isn't the software revolution of which we speak, what is? Simply put, it is the advent of sophisticated, free or nearly free web-based tools that can emulate, and often exceed, the features provided by large, often bloated, certainly expensive, software platforms. The maturation of the internet has resulted in free and cheap tools so powerful that many individuals and organizations are foregoing spending tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars per year on platforms designed to achieve largely the same results as free or inexpensive, Internet-based applications. Surprised? You shouldn't be; if there is one thing history has taught us

about the internet, it's that it dramatically drives down consumers' costs.

The availability of free or low-cost web-based software tools are now widely available for competitive intelligence applications. When organizations evaluate traditional competitive intelligence software packages (which can run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars), they typically have many overlapping needs including: article summarization, automated competitor website tracking, government regulation tracking, team-based or work-group portals for sharing intelligence analysis and notes, CI workflow, and keyword search trend analysis.

While most CI software vendors can address most, if not all of these needs, few vendors are able to deliver every capability well. In software development, just as anything else, trade-offs are necessary and resources are often allocated towards those features that are most marketable, not necessarily those that are most useful.

That said, with a little research, CI professionals can likely piece together a suite of stand-alone, browser-based, platform-agnostic products that can often be easily integrated into existing workflows that address most, if not all, of their software needs. Indeed, we've found that nearly every capability that is offered by the large CI software vendors (including those functionalities listed above) can be easily and cheaply replicated (and in some cases even surpassed) by free or low-cost software offered online.

Granted, this method won't be suitable for every organization, and it does come with its own drawbacks (such as lack of integration), but for the right CI group on a budget, free and nearly-free online applications can often replicate the features of larger, pricier options, providing an adequate substitute at a fraction of the cost.

William J. Dragon

Will is a Senior Consultant at Outward Insights, a Boston-area strategy and competitive intelligence consulting firm. He can be reached at wdragon@outwardinsights.com.

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