

CeBIT: World's top tech fair opens under a cloud

March 1 2011, by Aurelia End

The world's biggest IT fair opened Tuesday amid concerns over the security of its featured technology -- cloud computing -- after some [150,000 Google email accounts vanished](#) into the ether.

The theme of this year's [CeBIT](#) expo in Hanover, northern Germany, is "Work and Life with the Cloud" and "[cloud computing](#)," or the idea of storing data online rather than on individual machines, is the fair's undisputed buzzword.

"Cloud computing is the mega-trend in the high-tech sector. It is going to change the IT sector completely," said August-Wilhelm Scheer, president of BITKOM, which represents the technology sector in Germany.

"Many people are using cloud computing without even knowing it," he added, citing a BITKOM survey showing only one in eight people knew what the term meant, despite being avid users already.

Turnover in the cloud computing sector in Germany is expected to rise by around 55 percent this year and, growing at a breakneck pace, represent some 10 percent of the overall IT market by 2015, according to BITKOM.

Scheer cited the example of people posting holiday snaps on social networking site Facebook, playing online video games or signing up for an Internet dating website.

Cloud computing users are effectively storing their data on gigantic servers somewhere in the world, linked by Internet, rather than saving them physically on their own computer's [hard drive](#).

The advantages for business are clear -- no need to build and maintain costly IT centres for [data storage](#).

Partly for this reason, BITKOM estimates the sector will grow from 1.1 billion euros (\$1.5 billion) in 2010 to 8.2 billion euros in 2015.

But the disadvantage is that users can be powerless when things go wrong.

In an unfortunate piece of timing for the CeBIT, [Google](#) admitted it had temporarily lost 150,000 email accounts -- through which users can store documents and photos online -- due to a [technical glitch](#) at the weekend.

While this represents a tiny fraction -- 0.08 percent says Google -- of overall global users of the service, it is still a "small setback" for cloud computing, said Carlo Velten from Experton, an advisory firm.

"It's the first time this has happened on this scale," he told AFP.

Germans, who already jealously guard their personal data after years of being snooped on first by the Nazis and then by the communist secret service, appear to be especially sceptical, according to the BITKOM poll.

One in five said they would not use cloud computing services due to fears over a lack of data protection and 21 percent are scared their data would get lost.

Overall, more than half of Germans surveyed thought their data were

"not safe" on the Internet, compared to 40 percent who believed them secure.

Scheer said it was in the own interest of firms offering cloud computing services to "take these concerns seriously and address the security loopholes.

"We know that people make safe cars, safe machines and safe medical equipment. Why should we doubt that the cloud is also safe?"

Seeking to play down the security fears, he added -- "Of course, you could imagine an attack, a plane that destroys a server."

"But that is the same for power plants that produce electricity and that doesn't mean that every company has a generator in its basement," he said.

More than 4,200 tech firms from 70 countries are expected to attend this year's CeBIT with many of the big names that stayed away during the global financial crisis returning.

Google, IBM, SAP, Microsoft, HP and Dell are among the top companies setting up their stalls for the event, which runs until March 5 with Turkey as this year's "partner country."

The event was officially launched on Monday evening by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

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