

“The Cloud”

There’s a lot of buzz in the computer industry about “Cloud Based Computing”. It gets a lot of airtime on investor news reports as the next big thing to buy into. In fact, you may already be using “The Cloud” in your everyday computer usage, and may not be aware of it. This month, I will attempt to describe “The Cloud”, and how you can take advantage of it to make you home or office computing experience better.

Missed or lost a newsletter? You can always get back issues in Adobe PDF format online at my website - www.MedOfficeSystems.com/newsletter_tips.htm. If you have any questions about this or any prior newsletters, please call me at 630-852-1736 or 630-373-7429.

“The Cloud”

I’m not quite sure who coined the phrase, but “Cloud-Based Computing” or more simply, “The Cloud” has become the hottest trend in computing. The most basic definition is any type of on-demand software application that does the main computational work on a remote computer, and delivers only the answer or results to the local computer. The remote computer can be inside your company network, or thousands of miles away in a remote data center. A more strict definition calls for results to be delivered only via Internet, and without need for any software on your computer other than a web browser.

To be effective, Cloud-based computing has to offer at least one of the following: lower cost, better features, or better utility over software and servers you could run yourself. Here’s a few examples:

Hosted Exchange email: Lower Cost and Better Features

An essential element for many companies, email is one of the best applications to outsource to The Cloud. Let’s say you have a small business and you and your employees have email accounts provided by your website vendor or your Internet Service Provider. Chances are it is a POP3-type account, and has a few issues:

1. You can’t synchronize email between your computer and your Smartphone.
2. Your employees want to schedule meetings, and you need scheduling software.
3. You want to assign To-do’s and tasks to employees and want to track progress.

The Cloud solution is referred to as Hosted Exchange email and it solves these issues by providing the benefits of an Exchange email server without the high costs to run it yourself. With Exchange, your email, calendar and tasks are always synchronized between all your email-enabled devices: work and home computers and your Smartphone. Additionally, you can use Exchange to schedule meetings with your employees, assign tasks, and track progress toward completion.

Typically, Hosted Exchange is sold on a subscription basis, either monthly or annually per user. Typically included with the subscription is a copy of Outlook and Outlook Web Access, a webmail application. With these elements in place, you can achieve the same email capability as big corporations for half the cost. Examples of Hosted Exchange are www.RackSpace.com for larger concerns, and www.Mail2Web.com provides email accounts for companies and individuals.

Online Backup: Lower Cost, Better Utility

Backup can be a chore: the process of swapping disks, burning CD's or moving backup disks offsite can be tedious. For some, forgetting to keep track of backups can mean loss of vital data, in other cases a dropped backup disk can mean loss of data and cost to replace the disk. A simpler solution is to backup data to a remote, online backup service.

As an example, www.SugarSync.com has a 100GB backup account for \$149 per year. This is far more space than most users need, and is less than the cost of buying two portable backup disks. Another powerful feature is the file sync capability to keep data files on two remote computers up-to-date at all times. The web browser feature allows you to login and retrieve your files from any computer via the web browser. For the same features but even larger storage sizes or server backup, there is www.RemoteDataBackups.com .

Hosted Online Web store: Lower Cost, Better Features, and Better Utility

Amazon.com is best known for its online shopping service, but unknown to many, Amazon offers its massive computing facilities and software catalog on a rental basis: <http://aws.amazon.com/ec2/> . IBM, Microsoft, and Oracle offer similar on-demand services - you could literally rent supercomputer-level capability by the day or by the hour if you needed to.

A more down to earth example is that of a small online retailer subscribing to the Amazon Web Fulfillment Platform – the same software Amazon uses to run its own online store. Now the small online retailer instantly has the same look, feel and order-taking capability as the “big guys” without the massive cost of creating their own software and running their own web server.

Online QuickBooks: Lower Cost and Better Utility

If you are a QuickBooks user (I am) you will inevitably need to reference data in QuickBooks while you are away from your office or home computer. Wouldn't it be nice to have it available to you anywhere you may be? Well, you can – Intuit offers an online, hosted version of QuickBooks. Beyond the benefit of remote access, you also gain the benefit of offsite backup on Intuit's servers and multi-user capability. Now you and up to 5 employees can log on simultaneously from any computer with Internet access – no software to install or upgrade. <http://quickbooksonline.intuit.com/finance-accounting-solutions/>

The initial cost may seem high, but when you calculate the cost of multi-user access and the built-in offsite backup, the online version is much cheaper than having the multi-user version running on your own PC.

Summary:

Cloud Computing comes in many flavors and many brand names, but regardless of the label, the benefits to small business and individuals can be huge. Especially when compared to the cost of obtaining the same “big company” technology onsite, offsite services can enhance capability and be a relative bargain over the “do it yourself” approach. For more information on Cloud Computing, please give me a call 630-852-1736 to discuss which cloud services can benefit your business or home computing needs.