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Get off of my cloud

Microsoft has a cloud. Apple has a cloud. Amazon has a cloud and so do Telstra and DropBox. Even MiTek has a cloud! Just what is a cloud and how can you take advantage of this technology?



WHAT IS IT?

Put simply, “the cloud” is a generic term used to describe connecting to and using the resources of someone else’s computers. Often these computers are far more powerful and scalable than the average IT department could provide. You would usually connect to the cloud via the internet, but other methods are possible and there are many different types of cloud including:

Public cloud

A cloud is referred to as public when it’s accessed via a public network, like the internet. Amazon AWS and Microsoft Azure are further examples of public clouds. These services provide a number of functions such as “cloud computing” and data storage. Cloud computing allows you to access resources in the cloud such as servers, using a pay-as-you-go model where you only pay for the time and resources you use. Examples of public cloud services include Dropbox (file storage) and Xero (accounting software).

Private cloud

This is a term used to describe an infrastructure used by a single company, which generally increases security and control.

Hybrid cloud

This uses a mix of public and private cloud environments. You could use this option as part of a disaster recovery plan, replicating your on-premises infrastructure in the cloud, and using it in the event of a disaster.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES?

There are plenty of advantages, depending on the purpose you have in mind. For example, you may want to use the cloud to store files and have them available from any device anywhere in the world. You may want to move some of your existing on-premise services, such as email, to the cloud. Doing this means you no longer have to manage email infrastructure and it also provides a great deal of flexibility. Many on-premise services are also candidates for relocation to the cloud, such as accounting packages and Microsoft Office, but each company is different and each service should be analysed for suitability.

WHAT ARE THE CONCERNS?

There are a number of things, but most of them can be eased through adequate due diligence when selecting a cloud partner. Some of the top concerns include:

Security

Who can access your data? Who has physical access to the computers?

Internet access

Your access to the cloud is 100 percent reliant on your internet access. What happens if your connection goes down?

Vendor outages

Outages happen to the best of the cloud providers, including Microsoft and Amazon. Microsoft offers a 99.9 percent availability guarantee, but in real terms that equates to about nine hours of downtime each year.

Lack of mobility

What happens if you want to switch from one cloud provider to another? What if the cloud provider goes out of business? Can you move your data?

Ownership

Who actually owns your data? Are you signing it over to the cloud provider? Can they sell your personal data to third parties?

Where is your data actually stored?

Most big cloud providers have data centres all across the world. This provides redundancy, by replicating your data to a number of different data centres, so your data could be stored in Europe, Australia or Asia. Asking the following three questions of any potential provider can save headaches:

1. Is the vendor appropriately certified? (There are a number of certifications related to data handling, security, etc. SOCS 1 and 2 are the most common.)
2. Can you confirm that your data is still your data when stored on the cloud provider’s servers, ie, do you retain ownership?
3. Can you confirm that when you exit the agreement with the provider you can retrieve all your data from their servers?

CONCLUSION

Don’t be scared of the cloud. It’s now a very mature industry that can provide many economic and efficiency benefits to businesses and individuals, but you must do your due diligence when selecting a cloud provider as they are not all equal. And don’t rush to move everything across. Instead move the things that make the most sense and are the easiest to do. It’s best to first dip your toes in to get a feel for it and then increase your own knowledge and awareness. **T**

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