

DEPARTMENT TECH TALK BY JESSICA L. LEVIN, MBA, CMP

Bringing Cloud Computing Down to Earth *Understand the pros and cons of internet computing.*

Cloud computing. Surely you've heard the term; it's one of the "it" words in business today. While it's a trend that's often mentioned, it's rarely defined. To make the cloud less nebulous, in simple terms, cloud computing is a form of internet-based computing.

Here's a simple example: You might have a personal email account with Yahoo, Gmail, Hotmail or AOL, but your host is "in the clouds." You have an instantly-accessible account with a username and password, but never need to consider (or worry about) where the data is hosted, because the company you have selected is well-known and therefore you have a certain comfort level in terms of both reliability and security.

With the increased use of mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets (iPads), flexibility and accessibility are becoming increasingly important.

Consider all of the applications that you use on a daily basis, such as Microsoft Office, and how much simpler it would be to circumvent the installation process and get everything you need via the internet. In other words, cloud computing means never having to say you're chained to the computer because you can access them anywhere, anytime, via the internet. Google already had this vision when they launched Google Doc which offers similar, yet less robust, word processing and spreadsheet applications. These are free applications, housed by Google that allow you to not only create documents but share them, making collaboration a cinch. Google Takeout allows a user to log in with his or her Gmail username and password and extract data from other Google products. As of this writing, Google Takeout supports Buzz, Contacts and Circles, Picasa Web Albums, Profile and Stream but by the time you read this, other services and products might have already been added—it is Google, after all.

From an event planning perspective, cloud computing can be game-changing. Soon planners will be abandoning the sacred binder and trading it in for tablets that can access every file that was typically printed and stored in the binder. One application that works very well for planners is Dropbox, an online backup and file sharing program that stores a local copy of documents on your computer as well as a copy on "the cloud." With user-friendly interface capabilities, all your selected documents seamlessly sync with the web. In addition, Dropbox has mobile applications providing access to your files on your smartphone or tablet.

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You may already be in the clouds if you are using what is referred to as Software as a Service (SaaS). There are currently many variations of SaaS software including many event registration systems, association management systems and CRM systems that operate with this model.

For those of you who are business owners or operators, cloud computing has tremendous benefits. It eliminates or reduces the need to purchase and maintain servers in your office; since there is no software to install, valuable time is saved and quick transfer of information is seamless.

Of course, despite the benefits, there are also downsides of cloud computing. Security is always a concern; with cloud-based applications, the control lies not with you but with the security practices of the company that is housing your information. Of course, it's smart practice to read and understand the security policies and vulnerability testing procedures of any online software provider with whom you plan to work, particularly if you will be sharing sensitive information. Information about these procedures is usually readily available on the website of each provider.

Another concern with cloud computing is stability. Before letting any company host your data or supply your data, it's essential to examine the history of the company. How long has it been in existence? Does it have adequate funding? A substantial user base? A little research can go a long way in helping you make a wise choice—and more importantly, ensuring against loss of data or resources when and if the company you chose to work with shuts down.

Cloud computing is mushrooming; we will see more of it in the upcoming months as Apple launches its new, free product called iCloud, which promises users of Apple products a seamless, wireless backup and sync of all their products including PC users who use iTunes. With Apple in the game, we are sure to see rapid-fire changes in the virtual landscape.

The easiest way to stay informed about current developments is to keep reading, keep researching and keep your head out of the clouds. (Sorry – I couldn't resist). **es**

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