

The Server in the Sky Say Hello to Cloud Computing



By Amanda Etches-Johnson

Here's a random list of a few things I did during my workday today: edited a document with four colleagues; added 11 items to my to-do list; read two articles on the future of libraries; flagged about 13 other articles for future reading; created a spreadsheet with another colleague to track our progress on a project; took approximately four pages of notes at various meetings; chatted with a number of colleagues in the staff lounge; and updated my calendar more times than I care to count.

Sounds like an average day at the office, doesn't it? That's exactly what it was. Except I accomplished all of those things with almost no face-to-face contact with other human beings and the only tools at my disposal were my laptop, a browser, and a couple of web-enabled apps.

Welcome to the cloud! It's comfy up here.

This is not the stuff of science fiction – it's cloud computing. Chances are, you probably recognize some of these activities as ones that you perform during your average workday too, and probably using many of the same apps I do. I turn to Google for productivity tools, like Docs (docs.google.com) for documents and spreadsheets, Reader (google.com/reader) for my RSS feeds, and Calendar (google.com/calendar) for my schedule. My to-do list lives in my browser at Remember the Milk (rememberthemilk.com), as do my bookmarks at Delicious (delicious.com). While I am still an ardent fan of analog note-taking technologies (pen and paper!), nowadays I turn to a little app called Evernote (evernote.com) when I need to jot things down. And at my library, our staff lounge is actually an online chat room that I access through my chat client. Yes, we also have a real life staff lounge, complete with couches and a fridge, but I'd have to leave my office to get there, so I prefer the virtual one.

The "cloud" is actually the perfect metaphor for this group of applications, services, and platforms – an amorphous, fluffy server in the sky that we can see but can't really touch. The cloud not only houses our data (documents, calendars, and such) but also the very applications that we used to have to install on our hard drives, like productivity tools (e.g., Microsoft Office), email, time management software, and scheduling applications (including Outlook and Lotus Notes), browser favourites, and document readers. In fact, cloud computing is becoming such a ubiquitous trend that major hardware and software companies Microsoft and Apple have developed cloud counterparts to applications that used to require hard-drive

space, installation, and licenses (see Windows Live, windowslive.com, and MobileMe, apple.com/mobileme, for examples).

Of course, the most comfy part of cloud computing is that it not only affords us the luxury of no longer having to worry about software licenses and data storage and backups, it also means that all that data is accessible from a web-enabled device, including mobile devices.

But don't get too comfortable.

As much as the cloud metaphor – the amorphous, fluffy server in the sky that we can see but can't really touch – inspires a certain level of comfort, it also aptly hints at a sizeable limitation: depending on the cloud requires us to give up a certain amount of control over our data and apps. The cloud is only dependable as long as you have a stable internet connection and the applications' servers are firing on all cylinders. Without both conditions in place, you risk losing access to both your data and your applications. Of course, some cloud applications provide users with offline access to their data (for example, with a little browser extension called Google Gears gears.google.com, you can access Google Docs without a web connection), but offline access is usually the exception rather than the rule when it comes to cloud computing. Then there is the ever-present danger that a cloud-based app you depend on could

decide to pull the plug, and your only hope might be that they give you enough time to export your data (and in a format that you can actually use). There have been too many web 2.0 cautionary tales for us to ignore this possibility (the server failure at ma.gnolia.com and quiet closure of Stikipad are two painful cases in point).

So, do we quietly renew our software licenses and move on?

When you stop to think about the current limitations of cloud computing, you might be tempted to just renew those software licenses and not look back. However, it would be remiss of us not to consider the ways in which the cloud could revolutionize many library functions, from public access computing to how we serve our patrons. Cloud computing is a trend worth watching, and even in its infancy it offers many advantages that might well be worth the risk (note: keep backups).

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