

Trends in Information Technology

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Cloud Computing

Let's acknowledge the elephant in the room: **Cloud Computing**. Everyone is talking about it. But, what is it really?

Cloud computing is a paradigm of computing in which dynamically scalable and often virtualized resources are provided as a service over the Internet. Users need not have knowledge of, expertise in, or control over the technology infrastructure in the "cloud" that supports them. --Wikipedia

If you cut through all the mumbo-jumbo in that definition, you'll see that it means one thing: outsourcing. However, Cloud computing is more than just the standard outsourcing arrangement where a third-party company replaces your in-house staff. Cloud computing takes away the burden of purchasing servers, networking equipment, storage, operating systems and applications as well.

What does cloud computing mean to your firm?

Imagine walking into your firm tomorrow and being able to reclaim the space that those noisy, pain in the ass servers and networking equipment take up. Never needing to hire an IT company to come out and perform maintenance on your servers again. No need to pay for the electricity to RUN those servers. No need to beef up your air conditioning systems to keep all those delicate machines happy. Never having to pay Microsoft for their latest email server ever again. And, very likely, having better performance and fewer problems. That is what cloud computing promises.

Cloud computing is sold very much like electricity from your power company – you pay for only what you use and you really don't care how many power poles, transformers, generation plants and linemen they have to use to get you your power. You just want it to work when you turn on the light switch.

How do I decide whether to make the jump?

There are a few firms where cloud computing makes the most sense.

Small firms with fewer than 25 employees will benefit by getting a world-class IT infrastructure, features and management for a price much less than they pay today.

Larger firms with many, smaller branch offices are also great candidates for cloud computing. Typically, each of these branch offices would require a server and a way to get the data from that server to the central office. By moving to a cloud computing model, there is no need to purchase and maintain servers for each remote office.

When is a good time to make the switch?

If you have, in the last year or two, performed a major upgrade to your network, you'll probably want to sit on the sidelines a little longer to realize some return on your current investment.

If you are considering the replacement of a large portion of your PCs and/or your servers, it may be time to think about cloud computing. Reach out to your trusted technology provider for more information.

Managed Services

Managed services could be considered IT outsourcing version 2.0. I hesitate to even use the phrase "outsourcing" because the word immediately conjures up the image of telephone hell where you are speaking with tech support staffs for whom your flavor of English is a second language. On top of that, the original outsourcing models focused on reactive, helpdesk-based support which really didn't address issues until they had become problems. Progressive IT services organizations, called Managed Services Providers, have added features like 24x7x365 network monitoring, Microsoft patching, antivirus services, unlimited preventative maintenance and technology purchasing assistance to their outsourcing contracts. And, they renamed them to Managed Services, instead of "outsourcing" to get rid of the stigma.

What do managed services bring to your firm?

You'll have a technology partner watching over your network and doing what is best for your company.

Many of the little annoying problems that your employees have can be fixed without you watching the bill-o-meter clicking away time and material dollars. Your managed service partner will fix the little problems before they become big ones that that can put you out of business for hours or days. You'll have a team of people ready, willing and able to respond within an hour if there is a problem. Many times, with managed services providers, these features come at no additional charge.

How do I decide whether to make the jump?

If you have a smaller firm with less than 10 people, you probably have an "IT guy" who has kept you very happy for a number of years. When you have a problem he shows up in a reasonable amount of time, fixes your problem and sends you a bill for the number of hours he was on site.

If you have a larger firm with more than 150 people, you probably have a full staff dedicated to the IT department. They have systems and processes in place to ensure that your systems are healthy, they perform regular maintenance and they are constantly working on aligning technology with your business processes.

Managed services are what you need when you fall between these two major classifications.

What to look for in a managed services provider

Look for a mature product offering that clearly states what you get and how much it will cost your firm. Ask them for metrics like response times, resolution times and customer satisfaction for service requests. Listen to see if it sounds like they are making them up or looking them up. Ask for references.

When you call the references, ask them the number of times they have been surprised with system outages and how the managed services provider handled those issues. Ask if there have been any “gotchas” where you were billed for something you thought was covered and how the issue was resolved.



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