Ready Net Go, Inc.

IT Solutions for Businesses ... *Moving Forward*

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Cloud Computing & Microsoft Office 365

Ah, the cloud ... Have you seen the commercial with the couple in the airport with nothing to do? The man takes out his laptop, fires up the Internet and the woman say's "Yeah, cloud ...". Cloud computing isn't new but it's getting a lot of attention lately. For this newsletter, we'll define what cloud computing is and how you can benefit from it with an emphasis on Microsoft's latest release, Office 365.

In the computing world, the cloud has always referred to the ability to access applications and data outside of your local network. Basically, it's a delivery mechanism for software applications and services over an Internet connection. So instead of installing software on your computer and storing the data locally, the cloud allows you to access and use programs online while storing the data on other computers/servers outside of your home or office.

Cloud services can be more consumer oriented such as Twitter, Facebook, and photo sharing sites or more business oriented such as companies that provide "software as a service" (SaaS) or "application service providers" (ASPs). Examples of ASPs would include event planners, database management, and web hosts. All cloud services, whether they be consumer or business oriented, provide functionality for users without the upfront cost of purchasing and installing software and/or hardware. Many cloud providers offer free accounts while others charge a monthly subscription. Probably the most popular cloud service is webmail.

Examples of Cloud Service Providers

If you have an account with Gmail, Yahoo!, or AOL, (all webmail providers), you are using cloud email servers. Your emails are not stored locally on your computer; they are stored on servers maintained by the provider. You simply access your data by typing in a particular address in a browser (such as Internet Explorer) and log in with a username and password.

Another example of a cloud service provider would be a data storage site where you pay the company to store your data for you rather than take up precious storage space on your own computer's hard drive or on external media like flash drives or DVDs. Online storage of data, photos, videos, etc. also gives you the option of accessing your files from any computer in the world, again, simply by logging in to a site with a username and password.

Tip of the Month

How to Create a Strong Password

Strong passwords are a necessity right now for all your online accounts not just for financial transactions. If you need help, Microsoft has an excellent tutorial on what constitutes a strong password. You can find it here:

http://www.microsoft.com/security/online-privacy/passwords-create.aspx

Microsoft also offers a safe way to test your passwords to see if they are actually strong and will keep hackers at bay. On the page above, click the link under the header, **Test your password with a password checker**.

Some websites may prevent you from using special characters such as *, & or ! and may constrain you to use less than 14 characters. In those cases, use the maximum configuration requirements allowed.

Website Worth Watching

- www.fda.gov/safety/recalls - Searchable list of safety recalls and market withdrawals. Includes items such as meats, cheese, vegetables, candy, medical devices, pet products, and dietary supplements. The list is updated daily.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Cloud Computing

Many people find the convenience of cloud computing to be revolutionary while others are concerned about the security risks. At a basic level, cloud computing can be broken down into two uses - accessing software and/or storing data. Businesses will gain more from the software side of cloud computing while consumers can benefit greatly from either use.

Advantages

1. Your data is accessible from any Internet connected device including computers, laptops, tablets, Smartphones, and netbooks.
2. Your data is accessible anytime and anywhere you have Internet access (through Wi-Fi, 3G or 4G LTE, cable modem, DSL, etc. connections). You're no longer tied to one computer to access your data.
3. No large upfront costs. Numerous free programs or low cost subscription services offer people cost effective solutions to their computing needs. For data storage, many consumer level service providers offer up to 5 Gigabytes (GB) of free storage. Additional storage plans cost about $1 per GB per year.
4. No need to install large software programs locally on your PC. Upgrades are generally easy; most of the time automatically completed by the provider. This constant upgrade cycle is a definite benefit as you are not 'revision-locked', having to stay with a particular version of the software because of the high costs of upgrading to a recent release.
5. Cloud computing is generally hassle-free; conflicts with other programs installed locally on your computer are generally not a concern.
6. No need to continually expand your storage needs such as purchasing a larger hard drive, external hard drives or other storage devices to keep up with your growing data. If you store your data in the cloud, all you need is a monitor, basic processor, memory and an input device such as a keyboard and/or mouse.

Risks or Disadvantages

1. If you don't have Internet access, you won't be able to access your data.
2. Lost data - Since your data is housed outside of your network, you don't have complete control over what happens to it. Accidents happen; accounts get deleted, passwords get lost, companies go bankrupt (sometimes not giving you notice). If you are concerned about losing data you store in the cloud, you can use more than one service or create backups of your data (and store it locally) to ensure you will always have access.
3. Stolen data - Probably the biggest concern right now of putting your data in the cloud is the prospect of having your data stolen. As we discussed in last month's newsletter, online security is a growing problem. If you're concerned about security, your best option is to house the data locally or opt for a private cloud (discussed on page 3).
4. Performance may suffer if you have a slow Internet connection especially if you need to download a large quantity of data all at once. Example: Your computer crashes but you've been diligent and backed up your data files online. Although you have immediate access, it may take a full day to download all of your files over an Internet connection. Some companies may put your files on a hard drive and mail it to you but it will still take a day or more to get your system back in working order.
5. Performance may also decrease if the provider suffers an outage. If their servers go down, you won't have access to your data; you'll have to wait until they fix the problem or finish their maintenance.
6. Specialty programs like CAD, desktop publishing and some proprietary software do not have adequate online alternatives. You'll have to purchase a PC with robust specifications including a fast processor, significant memory and ample storage.

Private Clouds

Most of the well publicized public clouds are geared for consumers. Dropbox, Amazon EC2, and the forthcoming iCloud from Apple are examples. There are also private clouds, however, that many companies deploy on their own internal networks when the risks of public access are too great. Private clouds add a level of security and availability that far surpasses public cloud providers.

The Case for Virtualization

Employers know that the days of each worker remaining onsite 9 to 5, Mon-Fri are over. Employees need nearly constant access to company data by using a variety of hardware devices such as home PCs, laptops, Smartphones and now tablets. Virtual servers are allowing this to happen providing private access to company data even outside business hours.

We discussed virtual servers back in 2009 when they were becoming more mainstream. Basically, virtualization in the computing field relates to how hardware and software interact. With virtualization you can simulate multiple software programs on one hardware device without suffering from conflicts. Reduced capital costs and less maintenance are the biggest advantages that have drawn much interest.

Now that the benefits of virtualization have been well founded, companies are starting to market virtualization services in the form of private clouds. Instead of setting up and maintaining their own virtual servers, companies are looking to other's to offer virtualization as a service, otherwise known as a hosted private cloud.

Whereas a private cloud or virtual private cloud are housed and maintained by the company using the cloud resources, a hosted private cloud is maintained by an external company much like a public cloud. The biggest difference is the level of security and customizability.

Whether you go with a public cloud, private cloud, virtual private cloud or hosted private cloud will depend on many factors: cost, type of applications, availability, security, etc. They all have their place in the current market and can be used simultaneously in the form of a hybrid cloud environment.

One thing is for sure though; data portability will only become more important in the near future. Companies need to address the best way for their employees to access company data while outside the network and set up policies for employees so that everyone is on the same page.

Microsoft Office 365

As we've discussed so far, cloud computing has many benefits but also has many disadvantages. It will not work in all situations nor will it work for all people. One area that looks promising though, for both consumers and businesses, is accessing productivity software online such as word processing, spreadsheets and presentations. Microsoft has been steadily moving in this direction for some time now. In 2009, they released their Business Productivity Online Suite (BPOS) mostly to smaller groups of less than 20 users.

BPOS focused on online access to Exchange server, Sharepoint, LiveMeeting and Office Communications. Their newest release, Microsoft Office 365, will add more features to BPOS and become more marketable to more people - not just those with Windows Servers.

Advantages of Microsoft Office 365

Microsoft Office 365 is a subscription based service that gives you access to BPOS features as well as the following MS Office programs: Word, Excel, OneNote, and PowerPoint. You also have access to email, calendar and contacts through the Microsoft Outlook Web App.

You can access all of these programs with any device connected to the Internet whether it be a PC, Mac, tablet or Smartphone including the iPhone, Android phones, Blackberries, and Windows Phones. And if you have the desktop version of Office, you can sync the two programs to "talk" to one another so that when you make changes, you're always looking at the most updated version no matter how you access the file.

Microsoft Office 365 ... continued

Office 365 will work best for those with the Office desktop versions looking for portability options and team sharing. It will also work for those who have difficulty remembering to upload files to a flash drive when access is needed outside the network. You'll have to open the file in the Office 365 application though before you leave.

Disadvantages of Office 365

The biggest drawback to the online versions of Office programs is that they do not have all of the advanced features of the desktop versions. So if you are a power user and tend to create robust documents, you may find that the same features aren't accessible online. For most people though, Office 365 will allow you to create, edit, and share documents wherever you happen to be.

Upon initial testing, Office 365 isn't for novice users. The installation was a bit cumbersome - having a strong knowledge of Microsoft's programs is essential as well as a lot of tech know-how. Once installed, there is no easy way to switch between programs. You'll have to retrace your steps and open each program individually.

Pricing

Just released commercially, Office 365 subscriptions start at $6 per user/month for the first 25 users. You have 30 days to test the software before activating your subscription. Licenses for the desktop version plus the online version will also be available. For users 1 - 25, the cost will be $12 per user/month. Enterprise pricing (greater than 25 users) is estimated to be $16 per user for online access only and $24 per user for online access and a license for Office Professional Plus.

System Requirements

To use Office 365, you will need the following:

- Operating System - Windows XP service pack 3 or later, Mac OS X 10.5 or 10.6
- Browser - Internet Explorer 7 or later, Firefox 3.x, Safari 3.x
- System Software - Microsoft .NET Framework 3.0, Java client 1.4.2 (for Mac OS X)
- Office clients (*optional - only necessary if you want to migrate between the desktop client and the web versions*) - Microsoft Office 2007 or 2010, Office 2008 or 2011 for Mac, Microsoft Lync 2010

IMPORTANT: Internet Explorer 6 and MS Office 2003 will not work with Office 365 applications. If you are using either of these older versions of software, you will have to upgrade if you want to use the cloud applications.

Conclusion

Cloud computing is getting a lot of attention right now due to the many conveniences it offers both home and business users. If you're concerned about security though and just looking to access your data from outside your network, software programs such as GoToMyPC and LogMeIn may be the best option since they allow you to remotely access your PC as long as it is turned on and has Internet access. Another option is to download all of your data to a portable hard drive and carry it with you. (Note: Unless you bring your own laptop, the remote PC you use needs to have the same software with which you created your files).

If you're looking to access programs remotely and are technically inclined, setting up a private cloud through Virtual PC or a Virtual Private Network (VPN) may be the best option. If neither of these options work, consider trying a public cloud such as Microsoft Office 365.

Overall, cloud computing is here to stay and can be highly useful in many situations. There are a lot of options however; some of which may not be the best for you and/or your business practices. Give us a call for specific recommendations that will be suitable for your needs.

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