Understanding cloud computing first step toward optimum use

TECH STRATEGY

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The Cloud: Many people have heard of it, some people are using it for 100% of their business, but for the most part, many people don't understand what it is. Most people think of The Cloud as a magical place where all of an organization's (or individual's) data exists, free of any of the perils of storing that data at home.

Companies like Apple® and Google® have done a fantastic job of promoting cloud services. But one problem remains: most people don't understand what cloud computing is, and they do not know the best ways to use it. To understand, one must start with its definition:

• According to Wikipedia, the cloud (or cloud computing) is the use of computing resources (hardware and software) that are delivered as a service over a network (typically the Internet)

This probably does not sound nearly as magical nor mysterious as one might think. In essence, cloud-based services have been around for years. So, why is there so much interest in cloud computing now, as opposed to several years ago? One explanation cloud computing has gained in popularity has to do with the speed of typical Internet access and the lower cost of disk storage systems. Another reason may be that cloud services companies have managed to find ways to charge by the "unit" for their services, and many more of those companies are offering their systems on a fractional basis.

Amazon® is a prime example of the above scenario. Amazon® offers a cloud-based "disk" system, amongst other cloud-based products, where one can purchase a set amount of storage space on its cloud servers for a set amount each month. If your storage needs grow, you simply pay more for more storage, and the trend continues. Google, specifically Google Drive, is another system that charges by the Gigabyte for "drive" space — basically a virtual disk in the sky.

There are many benefits to using cloud computing. Some benefits include:

• Upgrades are performed regularly and without interruption in some cases, so a company is spared the "upgrade window" problem that many in-house systems require

• New features are introduced almost instantly

• Costs are spread across a number of months or years. This is great for cash flow, but beware - long-term costs can often be much higher than "installed" systems

Obviously, there are many other facets of cloud computing. It can be an extremely beneficial system on which to store a company's data, provided there is a strong understanding of what that data is and how it is to be stored, accessed and protected. When considering a foray in to cloud computing, a company must:

• Determine what type of cloud computing system is needed (storage, database, e-mail, etc)

• Determine how much data should be moved, and how much that will cost on a monthly or annual basis. If you are measuring overall costs, look at them over a 3-year period at a minimum.

• Determine how the current data is stored, and how secure that data storage is

• Determine how the data will be moved to the cloud computing system

• Determine how the data will be accessed in the future

• Train the people who will be accessing the data, so that they fully understand how their actions translate to potential security of the data

Take the time to consider these cloud computing factors, and then let answers drive your company's decision on whether or not cloud computing is the best system for your needs.

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