

What is 'cloud computing'?

Many people are confused as to exactly what cloud computing is, especially as the term can be used to mean almost anything. Roughly, it describes highly scalable computing resources provided as an external service via the internet on a pay-as-you-go basis. The cloud is simply a metaphor for the internet, based on the symbol used to represent the worldwide network in computer network diagrams.

Economically, the main appeal of cloud computing is that customers only use what they need, and only pay for what they actually use. Resources are available to be accessed from the cloud at any time, and from any location via the internet. There's no need to worry about how things are being maintained behind the scenes – you simply purchase the IT service you require as you would any other utility. Because of this, cloud computing has also been called utility computing, or 'IT on demand'.

This new, web-based generation of computing utilises remote servers housed in highly secure data centres for data storage and management, so organizations no longer need to purchase and look after their IT solutions in-house.

What does it comprise?

Cloud computing can be visualized as a pyramid consisting of three sections:

Cloud Application

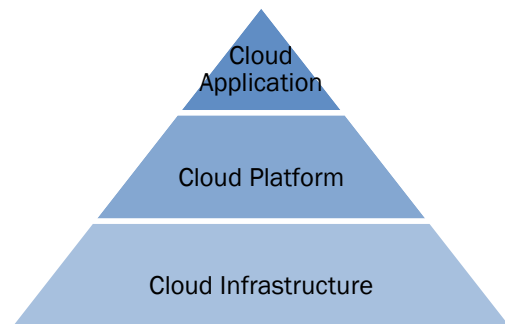
This is the apex of the cloud pyramid, where applications are run and interacted with via a web browser, hosted desktop or remote client. A hallmark of commercial cloud computing applications is that users never need to purchase expensive software licenses themselves. Instead, the cost is incorporated into the subscription fee. A cloud application eliminates the need to install and run the application on the customer's own computer, thus removing the burden of software maintenance, ongoing operation and support.

Cloud Platform

The middle layer of the cloud pyramid, which provides a computing platform or framework as a service. A cloud computing platform dynamically provisions, configures, reconfigures and de-provisions servers as needed to cope with increases or decreases in demand. This in reality is a distributed computing model, where many services pull together to deliver an application or infrastructure request.

Cloud Infrastructure

The foundation of the cloud pyramid is the delivery of IT infrastructure through virtualization. Virtualization allows the splitting of a single physical piece of hardware into independent, self governed environments, which can be scaled in terms of CPU, RAM, Disk and other elements. The infrastructure includes servers, networks and other hardware appliances delivered as either Infrastructure "Web Services", "farms" or "cloud centres". These are then interlinked with others for resilience and additional capacity.



Types of Cloud Computing

Public Cloud

Public cloud (also referred to as 'external' cloud) describes the conventional meaning of cloud computing: scalable, dynamically provisioned, often virtualised resources available over the Internet from an off-site third-party provider, which divides up resources and bills its customers on a 'utility' basis.

An example is Net@Work, a company that provides a multi-tenant architecture for supplying services such as Hosted Desktops, Software as a Service and Platform as a Service. Other popular cloud vendors include Salesforce.com, Amazon EC2 and Flexiscale.

Private Cloud

Private cloud (also referred to as 'corporate' or 'internal' cloud) is a term used to denote a proprietary computing architecture providing hosted services on private networks. This type of cloud computing is generally used by large companies, and allows their corporate network and data centre administrators to effectively become in-house 'service providers' catering to 'customers' within the corporation. However, it negates many of the benefits of cloud computing, as organizations still need to purchase, set up and manage their own clouds.

Hybrid Cloud

It has been suggested that a hybrid cloud environment combining resources from both internal and external providers will become the most popular choice for enterprises. For example, a company could choose to use a public cloud service for general computing, but store its business-critical data within its own data centre. This may be because larger organizations are likely to have already invested heavily in the infrastructure required to provide resources in-house – or they may be concerned about the security of public clouds.

What services can be used in the cloud?

There are numerous services that can be delivered through cloud computing, taking advantage of the distributed cloud model. Here are some brief descriptions of a few of the most popular cloud-based IT solutions:

Hosted Desktops

Hosted desktops remove the need for traditional desktop PCs in the office environment, and reduce the cost of providing the services that you need. A hosted desktop looks and behaves like a regular desktop PC, but the software and data customers use are housed in remote, highly secure data centres, rather than on their own machines. Users can simply access their hosted desktops via an internet connection from anywhere in the world, using either an existing PC or laptop or, for maximum cost efficiency, a specialised device called a thin client.

Hosted Email

As more organizations look for a secure, reliable email solution that will not cost the earth, they are increasingly turning to hosted Microsoft Exchange® email plans. Using the world's premier email platform, this service lets organizations both large and small reap the benefits of using MS Exchange® accounts without having to invest in the costly infrastructure themselves. Email is stored centrally on managed servers, providing redundancy and fast connectivity from any location. This allows users to access their email, calendar, contacts and shared files by a variety of means, including Outlook®, Outlook Mobile Access (OMA) and Outlook Web Access (OWA).

Hosted Telephony (VOIP)

VOIP (Voice Over IP) is a means of carrying phone calls and services across digital internet networks. In terms of basic usage and functionality, VOIP is no different to traditional telephony, and a VOIP-enabled telephone works exactly like a 'normal' one, but it has distinct cost advantages. A hosted VOIP system replaces expensive phone systems, installation, handsets, BT lines and numbers with a simple, cost-efficient alternative that is available to use on a monthly subscription basis. Typically, a pre-configured handset just needs to be plugged into your broadband or office network to allow you to access features such as voicemail, IVR and more.

Cloud Storage

Cloud storage is growing in popularity due to the benefits it provides, such as simple, CapEx-free costs, anywhere access and the removal of the burden of in-house maintenance and management. It is basically the delivery of data storage as a service, from a third party provider, with access via the internet and billing calculated on capacity used in a certain period (e.g. per month).

Dynamic Servers

Dynamic servers are the next generation of server environment, replacing the conventional concept of the dedicated server. A provider like Net@Work gives its customers access to resources that look and feel exactly like a dedicated server, but that are fully scalable. You can directly control the amount of processing power and space you use, meaning you don't have to pay for hardware you don't need. Typically, you can make changes to your dynamic server at any time, on the fly, without the costs associated with moving from one server to another.

Why switch from traditional IT to the cloud?

There are many reasons why organizations of all sizes and types are adopting this model of IT. It provides a way to increase capacity or add capabilities on the fly without investing in new infrastructure, training new personnel, or licensing new software. Ultimately, it can save companies a considerable amount of money...

Removal / reduction of capital expenditure

Customers can avoid spending large amounts of capital on purchasing and installing their IT infrastructure or applications by moving to the cloud model. Capital expenditure on IT reduces available working capital for other critical operations and business investments. Cloud computing offers a simple operational expense that is easier to budget for month-by-month, and prevents money being wasted on depreciating assets. Additionally, customers do not need to pay for excess resource capacity in-house to meet fluctuating demand.

Reduced administration costs

IT solutions can be deployed extremely quickly and managed, maintained, patched and upgraded remotely by your service provider. Technical support is provided round the clock by reputable providers like Net@Work for no extra charge, reducing the burden on IT staff. This means that they are free to focus on business-critical tasks, and businesses can avoid incurring additional manpower and training costs. IT giant IBM has pointed out that cloud computing allows organizations to streamline procurement processes, and eliminates the need to duplicate certain computer administrative skills related to setup, configuration, and support.

Improved resource utilization

Combining resources into large clouds reduces costs and maximises utilization by delivering resources only when they are needed. Businesses needn't worry about over-provisioning for a service whose use does not meet their predictions, or under-provisioning for one that becomes unexpectedly popular. Moving more and more applications, infrastructure, and even support into the cloud can free up precious time, effort and budgets to concentrate on the real job of exploiting technology to improve the mission of the company. It really comes down to making better use of your time – focusing on your business and allowing cloud providers to manage the resources to get you to where you need to go. Sharing computing power among multiple tenants can improve utilization rates, as servers are not left idle, which can reduce costs significantly while increasing the speed of application development. A side effect of this approach is that computer capacity rises dramatically, as customers do not have to engineer for peak loads.

Economies of scale

Cloud computing customers can benefit from the economies of scale enjoyed by providers, who typically use very large-scale data centres operating at much higher efficiency levels, and multi-tenant architecture to share resources between many different customers. This model of IT provision allows them to pass on savings to their customers.

Scalability on demand

Scalability and flexibility are highly valuable advantages offered by cloud computing, allowing customers to react quickly to changing IT needs, adding or subtracting capacity and users as and when required and responding to real rather than projected requirements. Even better, because cloud-computing follows a utility model in which service costs are based on actual consumption, you only pay for what you use. Customers benefit from greater elasticity of resources, without paying a premium for large scale.

Quick and easy implementation

Without the need to purchase hardware, software licences or implementation services, a company can get its cloud-computing arrangement off the ground in minutes.

Helps smaller businesses compete

Historically, there has been a huge disparity between the IT resources available to small businesses and to enterprises. Cloud computing has made it possible for smaller companies to compete on an even playing field with much bigger competitors. 'Renting' IT services instead of investing in hardware and software makes them much more affordable, and means that capital can instead be used for other vital projects. Providers like Net@Work take enterprise technology and offer SMBs services that would otherwise cost hundreds of thousands of pounds for a low monthly fee.

Quality of service

Your selected vendor should offer 24/7 customer support and an immediate response to emergency situations.

Guaranteed uptime, SLAs.

Always ask a prospective provider about reliability and guaranteed service levels – ensure your applications and/or services are always online and accessible.

Anywhere Access

Cloud-based IT services let you access your applications and data securely from any location via an internet connection. It's easier to collaborate too; with both the application and the data stored in the cloud, multiple users can work together on the same project, share calendars and contacts etc. It has been pointed out that if your internet connection fails, you will not be able to access your data. However, due to the 'anywhere access' nature of the cloud, users can simply connect from a different location – so if your office connection fails and you have no redundancy, you can access your data from home or the nearest Wi-Fi enabled point. Because of this, flexible / remote working is easily enabled, allowing you to cut overheads, meet new working regulations and keep your staff happy!

Technical Support

A good cloud computing provider will offer round the clock technical support. Net@Work customers, for instance, are assigned one of our support pods, and all subsequent contact is then handled by the same small group of skilled engineers, who are available 24/7. This type of support model allows a provider to build a better understanding of your business requirements, effectively becoming an extension of your team.

Disaster recovery / backup

Recent research has indicated that around 90% of businesses do not have adequate disaster recovery or business continuity plans, leaving them vulnerable to any disruptions that might occur. Providers like Net@Work can provide an array of disaster recovery services, from cloud backup (allowing you to store important files from your desktop or office network within their data centres) to having ready-to-go desktops and services in case your business is hit by problems. Hosted Desktops (or Hosted VDI) from Net@Work, for example, mean you don't have to worry about data backup or disaster recovery, as this is taken care of as part of the service. Files are stored twice at different remote locations to ensure that there's always a copy available 24 hours a day, 7 days per week.

Should I be concerned about security?

Many companies that are considering adopting cloud computing raise concerns over the security of data being stored and accessed via the internet. What a lot of people don't realise is that good vendors adhere to strict privacy policies and sophisticated security measures, with data encryption being one example of this.

Companies can choose to encrypt data before even storing it on a third-party provider's servers. As a result, many cloud-computing vendors offer greater data security and confidentiality than companies that choose to store their data in-house. However, not all vendors will offer the same level of security. It is recommended that anyone with concerns over security and access should research vendors' policies before using their services. Technology analyst and consulting firm Gartner lists seven security issues to bear in mind when considering a particular vendor's services:

1. Privileged user access—enquire about who has access to data and about the hiring and management of such administrators
2. Regulatory compliance—make sure a vendor is willing to undergo external audits and/or security certifications
3. Data location—ask if a provider allows for any control over the location of data
4. Data segregation—make sure that encryption is available at all stages and that these "encryption schemes were designed and tested by experienced professionals"
5. Recovery—find out what will happen to data in the case of a disaster; do they offer complete restoration and, if so, how long that would take
6. Investigative Support—inquire whether a vendor has the ability to investigate any inappropriate or illegal activity
7. Long-term viability—ask what will happen to data if the company goes out of business; how will data be returned and in what format

Generally speaking, however, security is usually improved by keeping data in one centralised location. In high security data centres like those used by Net@Work, security is typically as good as or better than traditional systems, in part because providers are able to devote resources to solving security issues that many customers cannot afford.

What about integration?

In order to make the most of your existing IT provision, the cloud computing services you decide to subscribe to should be able to integrate easily with your current infrastructure. Key to Net@Work's enterprise offerings is being able to easily integrate with customers' existing networks, so that our services become a seamless extension of those already provided by in-house IT departments. Cloud computing infrastructure should allow enterprises to achieve more efficient use of their existing IT hardware and software investments.

Net@Work works with many channel partners to provide an end-to-end solution to small businesses, so if a company wishes to evaluate, plan migrations and move towards cloud computing, this can be done quickly and simply, hand in hand.

Conclusion

When your business grows, your IT needs grow too. The scalability and speed of deployment offered by cloud computing means you can expand your IT provision instantly to meet increased requirements, and you can also scale it down again whenever you want. Security is typically greatly enhanced, along with resilience, and the flexibility and responsiveness of cloud-based IT services mean that you can react quickly to a changing business environment. Waste (of both time and resources) is reduced, allowing you to effectively do more with less. This provides you a leaner, more efficient IT model, available on demand.