

ERL Comment on Computing

Clouds on the Internet?

A new way of using PCs is coming which could help your business

Love them or loathe them, most people today have to use computers for some reason or other. It may be just to book flights or send and receive emails; or it may be for business and all financial matters. Most business users experience problems with storage, upgrades or just getting at your information which leads to frustration and reduces productivity.

There is a new approach that is now beginning to emerge that changes the way we use computers altogether. It is called “cloud computing” – and this article attempts to offer an introduction to the issue without “clouding the issue” in confusing computer terminology.

Some Basics

Stepping back and taking a basic look at our computers, they all share some common component parts. They have:

- a store of information – usually called a hard disc
- some brains – usually called a processor with some memory to speed things up
- some cement that binds this all together – called an operating system like Vista
- and something that uses the information in a way you want – usually called an application
e.g. Microsoft Word

What’s the Problem?

The problem is, we just have more and more information to store – photos, documents, videos, emails and so on – which means we have to look after this information carefully and from time to time buy a bigger store. I am old enough to remember when 4.8 Megabytes was considered huge – now we think in terms of thousands and even millions of Megabytes. Added to this, the cement keeps changing and being upgraded and new, better uses for our computers force us to invest in them time and again.

How Does Cloud Computing Help?

The idea of “Cloud Computing” is that we should be able to just plug into the Cloud and use whatever computing resources we need as and when we need them. An analogy is moving from our own diesel generators for the supply of electricity in our houses to having electricity supplied from the grid as and when we need it. Most people today “plug into the mains” as soon as they can. How then does this work for simple laptops and small PCs?

The answer lies in the connection to the internet. Providing we have a reliable connection to the internet, there are services available now that allow us to store our information well away from our own computers. The Internet is a Cloud that offers a range of services if you know what to plug in to!

Some Examples

A simple example of this is Googlemail or Gmail. Many of you will use this free service already for your emails. If you have a Gmail address, you simply plug into the internet (not necessarily on your own PC) and access your emails which are stored securely by Google many kilometres away. Other providers like Yahoo and MSN are also offering free services and new Cloud services are becoming available all the time.

The point is that you don’t “own” the email service – you just use it when you need to. You don’t know where the emails are actually stored or what version of the email application is being used – it just works and delivers exactly what you need when you need it. And most of these email services within the cloud are FREE!

So What?

How does this help me with my computer? Here are a few potential benefits:

- If your information is stored away from your computer you no longer have to buy new hard discs AND you don’t have to worry about backing up or making copies. All that is taken care of by the “cloud”.
- If your information is available only to you but through anyone’s computer you don’t have to carry around your own computer.
- At the moment many cloud services and upgrades are free. You no longer have to upgrade your applications as you are using applications from the cloud.

- Hard discs break. So do processors. Computers become “corrupted” and need rebuilding. As long as you can get on the internet such disasters are minimised.

Drawbacks

As with every change, there are new limitations that emerge from this idea of using the internet as a cloud with resources available as needed.

The first and most obvious, is the absolute need to access the internet. Depending on where you are, the availability and the quality of service can vary widely. Try travelling in parts of Africa to understand this basic problem!

Then there is the fear of not being able to touch and feel the computer that holds MY information. This concern is, I would suggest, more in the mind than in fact. How secure is your computer today? How many computers are stolen every day? How well do you really protect your information? In contrast, Google, Yahoo and all the organisations involved in this cloud computing MUST provide the highest level of security both in terms of access and of remote sites continually copying information. Put another way, most small computer users have “single points of failure” whereas cloud suppliers cannot afford to. Many major corporations are moving to cloud computing right now.

Also, not every use of information is available on the internet. Specialist needs which might involve very specific software and large lumps of information do not currently lend themselves to the cloud computing idea.

Perhaps the most significant practical drawback is the potential loss of performance if the internet link is slow or there is a major problem on the worldwide internet. This can be very frustrating – but then computer users are familiar with frustration already!

Is this just a dream?

Interestingly, as I am writing this article, a Press Release has been put out by Telefonica headed

“Telefonica Entering Into Cloud Storage in Spain” January 15th 2010. One paragraph reads as follows:

“Terabox, based on Digi-Data's V4 online storage technology, is available to new and existing Telefonica ADSL customers in Spain. The service enables customers to store, share, back up, organize and remotely access valuable digital files, including documents and multimedia, from anywhere there is an Internet connection.”

It is clear Telefonica are moving in the direction of cloud computing.

Have a look at Google (I am no great Google addict – they just have some good stuff in this area) and find the Documents they offer today. Dig in and you will see you can use their Documents, Spreadsheets and Presentations to create your own, or send your own Word or Excel or PowerPoint files to Google and have them stored by Google and available to you when you want.

I use a software package to do my own local backups and they offer 1 Gigabyte (a lot) of free storage on their cloud computing service.

There are numerous photo storage services – although you have to be careful about the resolution (detail) of the pictures they will store – but all of which take the strain of storing your photo collections.

If you need to share...

Some of the cloud computing services allow others to see your files IF you allow access. If you are discussing a particular document or want to share a presentation this can be a real boon. Again I use this function and was able to make a presentation with a colleague in Japan using a combination of Skype (free internet phone service) and Google storage.

Conclusion

When it comes to computing and accurately predicting where the future lies – many have tried and most have failed. For every 10 good ideas maybe one becomes the accepted “way”. The aim of this article is simply to alert the reader to the growing move to cloud computing, so when the term is used at least it means something. It does seem that this is gaining real traction and it does fix real problems for the “small user”. It certainly offers an alternative today to the never ending cycle of upgrading and investing heavily in our own computers. Whether it is for you is, of course, entirely up to you. At least you now know there is another option.

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