



Up in the air about cloud computing?

by Martha J. Cichelli

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Is this about getting 10,000,000 frequent flyer miles?

No – but *Up in the Air* is a great movie.

What IS “the cloud”?

Although this term is often used loosely to refer to an internet environment in which applications are run through a browser on computers that are not physically at your site, it actually has a much more specific meaning.

A true cloud environment involves a collection of virtual servers (at your site or elsewhere). Your application will be running on one of these servers. If that server fails for some reason, your application will automatically and immediately be switched to another. You don't know, and don't need to know, exactly where your application is running at any particular time.

A “mini cloud” also involves multiple servers – perhaps virtual and perhaps physical, at your site or elsewhere – but you know exactly

where your application is assigned to run. Or at least someone knows (usually the network administrator or manager).

A cloud environment may be “multi-tenant” in which one database serves many enterprises with multiple users of an application (although the data for each company is clearly identified and protected). Or it may be “single tenant” with completely separate and distinct databases for each company.

What is Software as a Service (SaaS)?

“Software as a Service” describes a delivery/payment method. User licenses are usually provided on a rental basis – perhaps for a monthly fee per user or sometimes for a percentage of revenue or with other financial arrangements. The site does not have a paid-up license for the software, but is paying continuously for the right to use the software – usually, but not necessarily, through an internet browser.

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What is a hosted system?

The software is NOT installed at the user site, but is provided on a server controlled by the vendor.

Are these different?

Yes, although they are sometimes used interchangeably.

SaaS applications may be installed “in the cloud” or they may just be on a remote server. Cloud delivered applications may be billed as services (most often the case) or they may be offered with a one-time license fee or even for outright purchase. Hosted systems may be cloud systems or they may not; they may be billed as services or they may be offered with a permanent license.

Salesforce.com is an example of a SaaS application. A group consolidation of the pagination process on a server at the group’s headquarters is an example of a hosted system. *Google Docs* is an example of an application that runs “in the cloud.”

How can they help your newspaper?

There are several reasons for seeking out any of these options.

If the application is installed and run from a server that is not your own and that is not at your site, you will not need your employees to maintain the server hardware. If a server fails, it will be your vendor or a service organization that gets it running again or moves your application to another one.

Your data will be automatically backed up (although you may have an option to make additional backups to a server at your site).

If the software application needs an upgrade,

it will be done at the server location rather than at your site. This has sometimes been called “perpetual beta” but it works well when there are frequent, small updates and when there are simple rollback procedures. It should require no intervention by your IT staff, and your users will always be using an up-to-date application.

There are financial and accounting benefits to selecting a service option. This usually eliminates a huge up-front payment and spreads out the costs across multiple years (remember, however, that there will be training costs and time investment for any new application). In addition, the fees can come from a service budget (and be expensed immediately) rather than from a capital budget (requiring depreciation over multiple years).

If you want to move to a replacement application from another vendor, you can simply stop paying the fees. Remember that you must work out a way to transfer/translate your data.

What are the drawbacks?

In a cloud environment, your server hardware, the application software and your data are located somewhere out of your immediate control. If this is your OWN cloud (such as at a central site shared by an entire group), that is not the case, although these resources will be farther away than in your own computer room.

If your application is provided under a SaaS model with continuing monthly payments, you will continue to pay as long as you use the application. There is no option to “discontinue maintenance” while continuing to use the application.

Both of these considerations mean that you must have a trustworthy relationship with your vendor. You must have a vendor that will stay in business, that will maintain the software with ongoing



upgrades and that is competent to maintain the hardware and keep the application available at all times.

I would like to thank Kevin Rose of CarTHINK for so clearly explaining all of this to me recently.

Can you do it with SCS?

We are currently (as of January, 2010) installing a major application for a group of newspapers that will run on their servers in a central, consolidated site of their own. There will also be client software running at each of the newspaper sites communicating with the central site via the internet.

We are also starting to offer some of our applications in a SaaS mode, and we can provide them running on servers in a safe “server farm” environment located within a few miles of our offices (but not owned by us).

So – the answer is “Yes, we can help you implement our applications on remote servers with SaaS as an option.” Let us know what you are thinking about and we can design a solution for you.