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Title: Clouding the Issue? Facts and Myths About Cloud Computing

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Everyone's talking about it, and some have even started using it — [cloud computing](#) is the current "big thing" in the technology world. But guess what? Cloud computing isn't new, and it's not particularly clever either. In fact, it's really just the joining up and packaging of existing technologies and deploying them in a way that might actually help you save time and money and improve efficiency.

Most cloud providers are in it to make some money, of course, and therein lies the difficulty. How do you separate the sales rhetoric from the truth? Many things are said and done in the name of cloud computing, and while some of them are true, that also means many are potentially misleading at best.

So here's a simple guide to help you see through the myths and make up your own mind.

Cloud applications are better

Well, it depends on what you mean by better. If it means easier to use and share, fewer configuration options, and fewer opportunities for things to go wrong, then yes, by and large cloud applications (think [Google Docs](#) versus the traditional [Microsoft Office](#) package) can be considered "better." This is largely because of the software limitations that run in your browser, although that's now changing with the latest [HTML5](#)-capable browsers.

If you like the advanced features that [Windows/Mac](#) screens can give you, then you may have to sacrifice a drop in functionality in return for ease of access if you move to the cloud. And, since the cloud is the Internet, it makes it far easier to integrate online with what traditionally has been seen as offline (e.g., your website and your database).

Data's not secure in the cloud, is it?

Not 100 percent. Nothing is, but it's probably much more secure than anything on your own PC or server. The physical security of your office, unless you work in a high-security facility, is not as secure as a data center. Additionally, the firewalls and other security measures employed by data centers are beyond the financial means of even the largest charities. And you can always go for a private or community cloud.

Moreover, there has been a shift in the perception of acceptable risk in recent years. On the whole, we now see online banking, investment management and so on as acceptable — or at least risks worth taking — so maybe it's time for cloud computing.

Cloud is green

Well, it might reduce your power consumption, but those data centers on which the cloud are built have to run on something. In 2010, they [accounted for 1.3 percent of the world's electricity consumption](#). So to some extent, it's pushing the problem around. Electric car companies claim their vehicles have low emissions, but those batteries have to be made somewhere don't they? Though, it is true to say that one big virtual server is more efficient than the equivalent number of physical servers. So to check the green box, you need to choose a data center that consumes renewable resources like those found in Canada and the Nordic countries.

Cloud costs more in the long run

It depends how you work it out. I could make a convincing demonstration either way with persuasive charts and numbers, but the greatest benefit of cloud is that it allows you to focus your resources and energies on your mission, not on IT. When you work out the costs of buying and maintaining servers, upgrades, power consumption, etc., it's easy to illustrate that cloud can cost less over time.

It's on the Internet, so it will be slow

Not as much of a problem these days. Internet connections are faster and more reliable while the servers in the data centers are more powerful and able to crunch the numbers more quickly. You can also "borrow" power on demand in the cloud. As long as it's a true cloud application, performance should not be a problem.

Beware the cloud-wash

Some vendors do little more than add the word "cloud" to their marketing materials and hope to catch a ride on the gravy train. A hosted Windows application does not a cloud app make. It just moves all the old problems to another server. Cloud usually implies virtualized servers, a transparent infrastructure (you shouldn't need to log on to the server just to use your app), multi-tenanted applications and contractually managed solutions (not technically managed).

It's just a passing fad

You're probably right, but if you've been in the technology industry as long as I have, you notice that what goes around comes around — but it's generally better. Dumb terminals? Now we call them netbooks. X.25 packet switching network? Now we call it the Internet. Distributed computing? Now we call it cloud. Only it's much better this time around.

So is it time to move to cloud?

The issue is complicated when you've already invested in "on premise" systems, but I have to say, if I was starting a new charity, I would definitely be looking at cloud solutions so I could focus on the cause, not the computers.