

Cloud Computing has become a buzz-word recently, but what is it? Cloud computing is internet-based computing. It is the provision of computing services over the internet that would previously have been provided locally on one's own computer.

Example of traditional computing

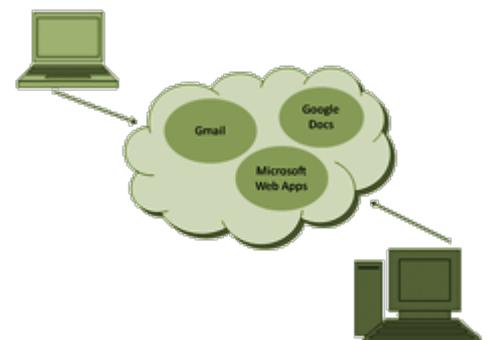
Most people have a word processing package. This is a program that is installed on their own computer. If you have such a program then you can start it running, create a document, save it or print, close the program and all of this is done without any internet connection. You may have originally acquired the program by downloading it from the internet, but it is now installed on your own computer and you can use it without an internet connection. Quite possibly, you do this with Microsoft Word.

Example of Cloud computing

Suppose you don't have a word processing program on your computer but you have an internet connection and you have Internet Explorer or Firefox or another web browser (a web browser is a program that allows you to see - and interact with - web sites). You can create, save, and print your document using a service such as Google Docs. The word processor is provided by Google via your web browser. All the programming for the word processor is at "their end", but you can still create your document etc. This is Cloud Computing.

A slightly different way of looking at this is that instead of buying a *product* (a word processing package that you install on your own computer and then use whenever you want at no further cost) you are instead buying a *service* (the provision of word processing facilities). Cloud computing services are often provided on a basis of paying for what you use - in terms of time, or amount of data stored for instance. There are also free cloud computing services (see below).

Why is it called "Cloud Computing"?



In computer flowcharts and diagrams, it has become the convention to picture any part of the process that happens via the internet as happening in a cloud - see diagram

Pros of Cloud Computing

- For organisations (with several or many users) cloud computing can be more flexible and quicker (and, therefore, cheaper) to deploy. The larger the organisation, the more this is likely to apply.
- Cashflow for the user is improved as services are paid for as they are used, rather than up-front. Cashflow is also helped as expenditure is moved from capital to revenue expenditure (completely claimable against tax in the current period rather than written off over a number of years).
- Updates, bug fixes and so on are very easy and inexpensive for the supplier to provide as there are no downloads or CDs/DVDs to supply, and the timing is under their control.
- The user can access the program/service from any suitable computer with internet access.
- Users don't have to download and install updates, bug fixes etc.
- Cloud computing tends to mean that users can use smaller, less-powerful (and, therefore, less expensive) computers to access the programs.

Cons of Cloud Computing

- There is a perceived loss of control as data may be stored in the cloud and program functionality may change without the user wanting it or needing it to change.
- It can be slower to access and use as the "conversation" between user and program has to happen over the internet rather than just on the local computer.
- Cloud programs tend to be less sophisticated in their power, options and configurability.
- There are huge problems if internet access goes down or if the service provider's system goes down.
- There are security implications as data is constantly passed across the internet and may be stored remotely.

Some examples of cloud computing resources that are free of charge can be found here:

<http://www.docs.google.com/> - word processing, spreadsheet, and drawing

<http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/web-apps/> - Word, Excel, PowerPoint, OneNote

<http://mail.google.com/mail/> - Gmail webmail

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