

THE 101 GUIDE TO THE CLOUD

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What is The Cloud?

You may have heard the term cloud computing or 'the Cloud', but could you describe what it is? There are so many definitions flying around that you wouldn't be alone if you struggled to define it. Therein lies the problem - the Cloud has all the hallmarks of being a disruptive, game-changing technology that will revolutionize the way that businesses operate. But if confusion exists, how can businesses actually reap the rewards that the Cloud promises?

In a nutshell, cloud computing delivers flexible applications, web services and IT infrastructure as a service, over the Internet, using a utility pricing model. It is based on a computing model that allows businesses to instantly scale their technology requirements to meet business needs and demand. The Cloud is a cost-effective approach to technology because businesses don't need to make usage predictions, upfront capital investments or over purchase hardware or software to meet the demands of peak periods.

With the right approach, the Cloud can work for any size organization. The industry has seen the highest uptake from start-ups and tech savvy developers where there are fewer decision makers. More and more, however, enterprises are starting to adopt the Cloud for different use cases. Examples of this include pharmaceutical companies who are using the Cloud to gain access to computing for the purposes of drug research data analysis as well as online retailers, who are using the Cloud to meet website traffic demands during peak seasons.

As you move into any new technology, it is important to understand the benefits or use cases it offers. As with any technology investment, it is imperative to carefully plan the implementation of cloud technology to ensure maximum ROI. Simple guidelines to follow when planning a transition to the Cloud are outlined below.

STEPS TO IMPLEMENTING A CLOUD

1. Plan and Be Realistic

The most important first step when implementing a Cloud Solution is to establish a clear and realistic set of goals. Approach the planning process with patience — don't try to do too much too soon.

Also, you should consult key internal stakeholders at the outset of any cloud implementation. This includes legal advisors and indemnity insurers to ensure full protection if a data breach occurs. Other internal stakeholders, including those who sign off technology purchases, e.g. the CEO in a small or medium business and the IT Director in a larger organization, must also be consulted.

2. Identify the Problem

Once the objectives have been outlined, take inventory of your applications, consider which ones should be to be moved first and identify the in-house expertise available to support the migration. A thorough assessment of the applications to be migrated to the Cloud is crucial before an investment, with consideration for which applications are most suited for the Cloud and why.

One approach is to determine where you have the most IT pains today and where you stand to gain the biggest benefit from the Cloud. Another approach is to migrate less 'risky' applications—those that are not core to the business or customer facing—first. You may want to start testing the Cloud with a low risk or legacy application that needs to be refreshed. This will give your team time to learn more about working with the Cloud.

Implementing cloud does not have to be a complex project. Complexity, or simplicity for that matter, will be dictated by the planning that goes into the project prior to start, the chosen cloud provider's approach to migration and setup, and the type of applications to be migrated.

3. Choose the Right Partner

Choosing the right cloud partner is another key component for ensuring a successful and long-term partnership. Be sure that the Cloud provider is going to support you in the Cloud. They should be someone who cares about your success and will share in both your achievements and your failures. Other key questions to ask a cloud provider during the selection process include:

- How long has the company been offering cloud services?
- Is the company profitable? If so, for long has the company been profitable?
- Does the company provide a reliable and secure service? What compliance and controls are in place for the service?
- Does the company provide 24x7 technical support? Are there additional costs associated with the support provided? What is included in the company's technical support? How many support techs are on the support team?
- What technologies does the company's Cloud service support?
- Does the company have a product roadmap they can share?
- What is the service level agreement associated with the service?
- Does the company require a long-term contract to sign up for the service? Are there any set-up costs associated with sign up?
- Are discounts available for high volume usage? If so, at what volume levels?
- Does the company require a minimum monthly spend?
- Is there a free trial period offered with the service?
- Does the service enable mobile access?

4. Implement "The Cloud"

After you've selected your cloud provider, and identified which application you want to migrate first, it's time to begin your implementation. Email is usually a good place start because it is easy to move from a dedicated server to the Cloud because it has one of the most painless IT applications to migrate. You can also try your email in the Cloud in a phased approach starting with a handful of users to pilot the program before getting fully committed. The Cloud is painless to try before you buy because of no long-term commitment and simple purchasing process.

After the pilot program, reassess how the Cloud is working for your business needs. If everyone is happy with the performance and costs benefits, it is time to work with your cloud provider and begin a broader deployment.

Remember to evaluate your needs over time to see where you can gain new benefits from the Cloud. The Cloud is not a static technology and, as such, will continue to evolve and change. Because the cloud provider-vendor relationships are fluid, you can move to better technologies without penalty.

What is important is to remember that the Cloud is a compliment to your current IT investment. It is not an all-or-nothing solution, but something that can be adopted over time with careful consideration and planning. Each cloud implementation should be based on your company's individual IT needs.

5. The Time is Now

The time has never been better to start experimenting with the Cloud. The tightening economy means businesses have a greater need to get value for money and this is one of the primary benefits of cloud computing. It enables businesses to match costs directly to revenues to scale up and down very quickly. Experimenting now with the Cloud will put businesses in the best possible position to not only survive, but flourish when the recession ends.