

Cloud Storage—The Issues and Benefits

Today's Data Protection Challenges

Remote or cloud-based storage solutions have been around for many years. The pendulum between local onsite storage (and control) and cloud-based storage services has swung several times over the course of storage technology development. Storage location and control has changed with the dominance of mainframes, client/servers, and PCs, and the changes in price and capabilities of storage. Cloud technology is the latest iteration of this trend, providing additional flexibility for storage users.

As cloud technology develops it can be difficult to define its capabilities and benefits; however, there are two areas of cloud computing that have some very persuasive benefits: cloud storage and cloud backup and recovery.

While storage and backup in the cloud are slightly different services for slightly different needs, they both allow users to scale storage space requirements to meet expanding requirements, improve manageability, and can be integrated easily to back up most all aspects of a businesses' data requirements, from server to laptop. Though cloud-based solutions have been around for many years, the success of companies like salesforce.com, the advances in technology, and the greater economic benefits seem to have produced a tipping point.

Is the Cloud Ready?

As interest in the cloud increases, there has been a lot of talk about the maturity and trustworthiness of cloud storage technologies. Is it hype or is it real? Many end-users and IT managers are excited about the potential benefits of cloud storage, such as being able to store and manipulate data in the cloud and capitalize on the promise of higher performance, more scalable, and cheaper storage. With so many benefits being bandied around, how can you ensure you select the best possible services? How can you know it is the right choice for you and your business?

As many well known—and many unknown—vendors compete to offer cloud storage services, there are increasing numbers of solutions available. Not all are of equal quality, even if associated with a known brand name. You must select a cloud storage solution from a company with experience in remote storage and a proven track record. After all, you are trusting your company's mission-critical business data to this vendor. In short, the cloud is ready... just be sure you pick the right cloud.

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The Economic Angle

A credit crunch can make it more difficult for businesses to finance the capitalized costs of adding more onsite data center storage. Economic uncertainty can mean businesses will have to keep their costs variable and non-capitalized—using on-demand storage solutions—and they may be encouraged to consider outsourced storage solutions in the cloud. In addition, many businesses with highly variable storage needs do not want to pay for storage that may go unused.

The latest online backup and storage services are cost-effective compared to most internal solutions, and provide the added benefit of offsite disaster recovery. From a business point of view, the ability to cost-effectively access your files from anywhere, from any computer, and ensure business continuity has clear advantages. Cheaper costs per GB of storage (for the same functionality) and true site disaster recovery are key business drivers.

The flexibility of cloud storage is also very appealing. Cloud storage products provide elasticity, with capacity that grows as required and scales back as soon as this excess capacity is no longer needed—you should only pay for what you use. A cloud storage service provider can base its pricing on how much storage capacity a business has used, how much bandwidth was used to access its data, and the value-added services performed in the cloud such as security and deduplication.

Unfortunately there are many service providers that offer “low price” but fail to include basic services, so that hidden fees can add up very quickly. Some common hidden fees to watch out for are connecting fees, account maintenance charges, and data access charges. Cloud platforms should offer clear and predictable monthly bills allowing customers to manage costs more accurately.

Demand Security

In terms of security, cloud-based services must be managed and operated the same as enterprise systems. The data must be properly encrypted both in motion and at rest, the physical locations of the cloud must be secure, and the business processes must be appropriate to the data and usage. Once those constraints are satisfied, cloud storage is no more or less secure than physical storage and the chance of data leakage is no higher than that of onsite storage. Although cloud computing standards are still being developed, the ability to meet existing standards, such as SSAE 16 compliance and the Uptime Institute’s tier levels, are key indicators of top quality.

Also consider where your data is actually kept. The physical location of your data can be very important (for EU Data Protection Directive compliance, for example) and, if you are utilizing cloud storage for your disaster recovery plan or attempting to pass strict security audits, the location of the data and the mechanisms defined to make that data accessible can be critical. If you live in a hurricane zone, for example, you wouldn’t want to risk that your cloud is in the same area.

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Easier All Around

Cloud storage can address many challenges that physical storage doesn't:

- You are not dependent on a single server.
- There is no direct hardware dependency.
- You don't have to buy more disk space than you initially need to accommodate future data growth.
- Business continuity is provided in the event of a site disaster.
- A virtual storage container can be provisioned that is larger than the physical space available.
- You can drastically reduce over-provisioning in a pay-as-you-go model.
- Cloud storage allows you to access the entire storage pool from a single point.

All of these benefits make the administrator's job easier with a single administrative interface and a unified view of the data storage.

Cloud Inequality

Remember that, while cloud storage makes these advantages obtainable, they are not guaranteed. Not all cloud storage companies are created equal. As the benefits of this technology become increasingly apparent, many new vendors with limited experience are coming on the scene. Choose the wrong provider and these benefits can very quickly disappear. All the physical storage standards still apply to cloud storage so make sure you approach cloud storage with security in mind and demand the best quality services to ensure business continuity. The contract between you and the cloud provider must be specific and detail the methods used to price, locate, manage, and access the data.

Take the Next Step

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