

Tech Talk

Navigating the world of technology one gadget at a time
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Cloud Computing

Volume 5, Number 5

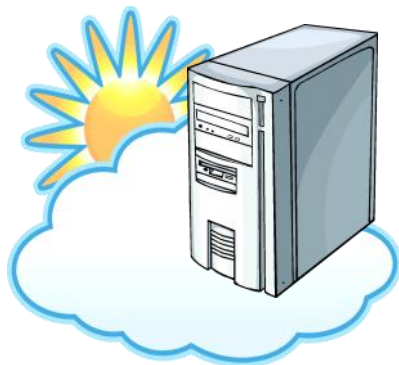
What is cloud computing and why should I care?

Cloud computing is getting a lot of attention in the media lately, and perhaps deservedly so. It's a simple concept – documents, information and programs are stored on remote computers via the Internet instead of on your local PC. Your data stored online becomes part of a global *cloud* of information you can reach from most any computer with Internet access.

You should care about cloud computing because it has become very popular in the U.S., and entire devices like netbook computers (see Tech Talk Vol. 5, No. 3) are optimized for the minimal disk-space and processor requirements of cloud computing. According to a 2008 study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 69% of Americans have used some form of cloud computing (www.pewinternet.org/topics/Cloud-Computing.aspx).

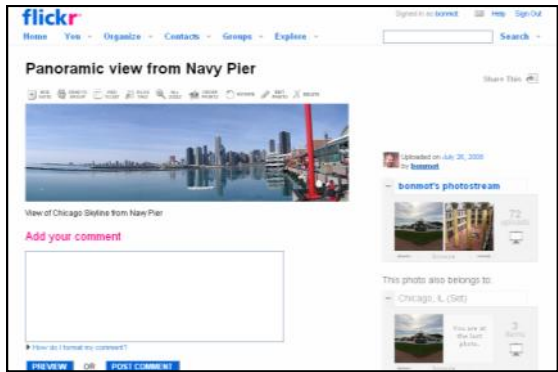
What are some popular cloud computing applications?

Perhaps the most common cloud computing application is web email. Your Hotmail, Gmail, or Yahoo! Mail account that you check daily with a web browser is actually part of the cloud. Web email can be helpful if your home computer starts sparking and smoking, as you'll be able to reach your email from one of the Library's public computers while yours is in the shop for repair.



Aside from web email, people have flocked to online **photo sharing** sites like flickr (*flickr.com*). Sites like this let you upload your pictures, decide who can see them (e.g., only friends and family), assign keywords to make them easily searchable and submit them to existing groups of photos created by others.

For example, this image from Navy Pier is part of numerous public groups including “Chicago by the Lake” and “City Skylines.”

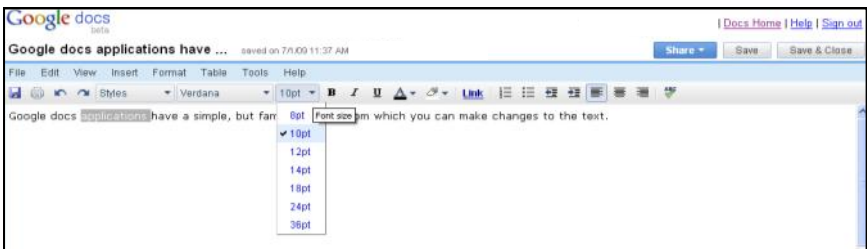


An image of the Chicago lakefront on flickr, a photo sharing site in the cloud.

Standard business applications like

word processor and spreadsheet thrive in the cloud and offer compelling features like auto save after every change.

Google Docs (*docs.google.com*) is probably the most popular suite of business applications in the cloud. Google Docs web applications look a lot like their traditional counterparts, featuring standard toolbars, file menus and the like, and they provide impressive collaboration functionality over the Internet. For example, you can edit a document simultaneously with several colleagues in other cities.



Users of standard word processing and spreadsheet applications will feel right at home with the cloud versions of these programs.

Are there other ways to save information in the cloud?

There are some intriguing services which allow you to store your information on remote servers. One unique service called

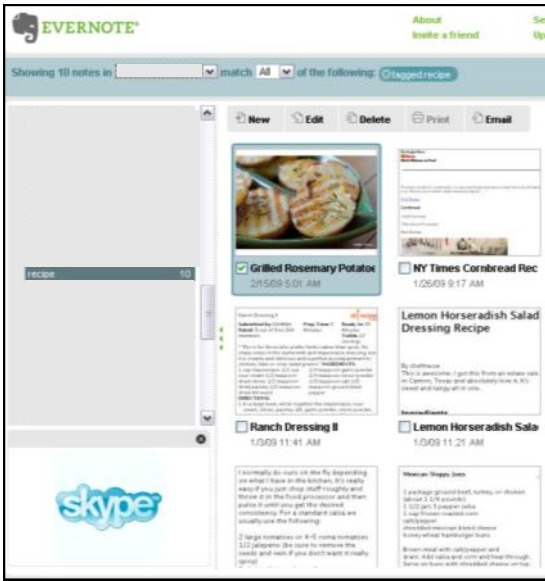
Evernote (*evernote.com*) lets you copy web pages, screen captures, emails and most any other sort of graphic or text into an electronic scrapbook on your computer. For instance, you can use Evernote to store recipes you've found on the Internet or to store carry-out menus from your favorite restaurants.

The cloud aspect comes into play as the data is synchronized with Evernote's online server. Any information you save into Evernote on your home computer becomes available on Evernote's website. But it gets better. If you install the Evernote program on your other computers, it will synchronize to those computers too. There's even an iPhone application if you want access to your notes with a smaller device.

Cloud data storage is an even more flexible means of uploading your information to the cloud. It typically works by designating a folder (or group of folders) on your computer to be uploaded to a remote server. It will then automatically synchronize the latest version of your files onto any other computer you designate.

How is this helpful? This folder looks like any other folder on your computer, so it's a breeze to use. Dropbox (*getdropbox.com*), Box.net and Microsoft Live Mesh (*www.mesh.com*) are three popular cloud data storage choices.

Many people also use the cloud to store web browser bookmarks. **Delicious** (*delicious.com*) is a service which lets you save and access links to your favorite sites from any computer on the Internet.



You can use Evernote to capture and store recipes from the Internet.

It also lets you share your bookmarks and add bookmarks suggested by others to your own collection. You can even add a Delicious menu to web browsers like Firefox, giving you direct access to these bookmarks while you're surfing.

Use discretion regarding what you put into the cloud.

When signing up for any cloud computing service, read the fine print of your user agreement to see what (if any) rights to your information you may be giving away. Try to find out what happens to your personal information if the company fails. You may want to keep your most sensitive documents and data out of the cloud, as you are relinquishing some degree of control when you upload them.



Conclusion

The rise of broadband Internet access across the globe has enabled many bandwidth-hungry services including streaming video and cloud computing. The ability to access your information from a variety of computers is a truly compelling feature and makes it possible to remain productive regardless of where you are. Since most of these applications are free (at least for basic functionality), there's little risk in giving them a try.

If you have questions, comments or suggestions, you can visit me at the Reference Desk, contact me via email (moetting@hinsdalelibrary.info), or call me at 630-986-1976x225. An archive of recent Tech Talk issues can be found at www.hinsdalelibrary.info/reference-resources/technology-at-the-library/tech-talk/.

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7/15/2009



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