

Typical consumer cloud computing scenarios – are you using the cloud?

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Cloud computing represents one of the most important technological changes to come about in the history of computing. The irony is that 'the cloud' has been used in the consumer space to provide online services like email for many years now without being recognized as such. At its best, cloud computing is able to provide consumers with on-demand services delivered to their smartphone, PC, laptop or tablet in real time for little or no cost. Most consumers happily embrace the likes of Facebook, Google, Twitter, MySpace and other online services to enhance their personal lives without ever thinking of the term cloud computing.

However, while the cloud enables users to manage and record their lives, connect with friends and family and share new experiences in new and exciting ways, concerns around data security and privacy have begun to emerge which threaten to undermine this revolutionary new paradigm. Consumers need to be confident that their personal information is safe in the cloud, that it is always available and that when they want to leave a service all of their data comes with them. They also need to be sure that the services they are using on sites like Facebook are as safe as they possibly can be from cyber criminals keen to steal their personal data.

A definition

Put simply, cloud computing is a system which allows users on-demand access via the internet to a shared pool of computing resources – in the consumer sphere this is most likely applications and services. It's quick and easy to sign up to, or buy these services online, and once uploaded your data will be stored almost exclusively in the provider's data center.

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Email: All commercial email providers including Yahoo, Google and Microsoft (Hotmail) are cloud-based services. Unless you have an email server in your home (and let's face it who does?) you will be using cloud-based email.

Blogs/websites: Again, unless you have a server on the premises, most blogs are now hosted on commercial cloud-based platforms such as Movable Type or WordPress, while a third party hoster such as Fasthosts will take care of the heavy lifting and keep your website afloat.

Social networking sites: MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, Bebo, LinkedIn – these sites are all hosted in the cloud (where your data will be stored if you sign up) and delivered to your device via the internet.

Mobile app stores: Android Market, Apple App Store and other sites are all provided by the big-name smartphone platform vendors for users to visit and download their apps.

Gaming: Xbox Live, World of Warcraft and hundreds of other platforms are all hosted in the provider's data center, enabling in some cases large numbers of players to interact with each other online.

Productivity tools: Until recently productivity tools were confined to the desktop. Productivity tools which enable word processing, spreadsheet and presentation making have gone online and cloud-based. Think Google Docs, and Microsoft's Office Web Apps.

Online storage and backup: Data such as photos, music, documents and other files are filling up our PC and laptop hard drives and smartphones day by day. The thought of losing it all doesn't bear thinking about, so more and more people are looking at services which can keep their data secure and constantly accessible in the latest version from any internet-connected device. packages for consumers.

