

Introduction to
cloud computing

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Introduction

Welcome to our introduction to cloud computing. It will help you understand the cloud, how it works, and how businesses like your clients' are using it. It will also give you an overview of what cloud computing means for your practice.

What is cloud computing?

Cloud computing represents a real change in how you and your clients use technology. However, the idea is not new, and you're probably already using cloud applications without realizing it. Whenever you log onto a web-based email account, shop online, or use social media sites like Twitter or Facebook, you're using the cloud. The software and storage for your email, shopping, or social media accounts don't exist on your computer. Instead, they're hosted in the cloud.

For accountants and bookkeepers, the cloud can give on-demand access to your clients' company data, documents, and applications from wherever there is an Internet connection. Cloud computing is simply using the Internet to access applications, data, or services that are stored or running on remote servers.

In short, cloud computing means storing and accessing data and programs over the Internet instead of on your computer's hard drive. This takes pressure off the computers within your practice and in your clients' businesses, as the work of processing software applications, data storage, and backup systems is done in the cloud. In fact, the only requirement made of your practice's computers is that they are able to connect with the cloud computing system's software. To do this they may need nothing more than a web browser.

How is cloud computing used?

So how are accounting professionals using cloud computing? Many have already recognized the security offered by the cloud and are using it for document and file storage. Others enjoy the ease it brings to file sharing, allowing them to exchange information with clients, partners, employees, and suppliers wherever they are in the world. The way we communicate has also changed, with many accountants and bookkeepers promoting their practices through social media sites like Twitter and LinkedIn.

Some companies use cloud-hosted services to get colleagues together using web and video conferencing. Travel and expenses are eliminated as people "meet" in the cloud, rather than face to face, for anything from training to planning to even brainstorming new ideas.

Accounting and invoicing are increasingly managed from the cloud. You and your clients can enjoy the benefit of continual software updates that happen automatically. This means you can rest assured that you and your clients are always on the latest version of the software, eliminating the need for time-consuming updates.

The benefits of cloud computing

Cloud computing delivers a range of business benefits. For accountants and their clients, the range of benefits is vast. Practices can maximize efficiency and introduce a more joined-up way of working with clients and colleagues.

Speed and efficiency

When data is stored in the cloud, multiple individuals can process and access it simultaneously, speeding up the rate of work. Documents can be approved and checked quickly and easily. Plus, cloud computing saves time on file sharing. Files that are too large to email can be accessed quickly on Internet-enabled devices.

Reliability

Before joining the cloud, some clients may worry about power outages and Internet connectivity. However, the truth is that reliability is far greater when your information is hosted on the cloud. The data is browser based so you don't have to worry about its corrupting or your computer's crashing, as everything is stored remotely. It is always worth checking the support that your provider offers and making sure that it can support you and your clients when you need it, preferably outside of the normal working day.

Enhanced customer service

Using cloud computing stops distance between you and your clients from being an issue, allowing you to respond quickly when circumstances change. Plus, because the web-based technology enables mobile working, it frees up quality time to spend with your clients, allowing you to work from their offices when necessary.

Automatic upgrades

Cloud-based software automatically upgrades, so you're always using the newest version. There's no longer any need to wait for updates or upgrades to be downloaded and installed. If implemented properly, there can be much less reliance on your in-house or outsourced IT team, which will help you keep costs down. Many providers will charge you monthly for a cloud-based service, so upgrade payments will no longer be necessary—both you and your clients will always be on the most recent and compliant version.

Mobility

Working “anytime, anywhere” allows you to access data, applications, and email whenever you need to. Using just an Internet connection and a browser, colleagues on different continents in different time zones or on the move can work together on the same project.

Flexibility

Cloud computing is more flexible than using in-house servers. As technology, laws, and regulations are constantly changing, cloud software can deliver updates to all customers quickly. It also offers the ability to increase or decrease server size as business needs change, so it's scalable.

Security

Perhaps the most significant aspect of cloud computing for businesses is the assurance that their company data is secure. In fact, reputable cloud vendors are specialists in security. Both the physical buildings where servers are housed and the online customer data itself are protected by multiple layers of authentication.

Summary

Working in the cloud can provide a range of low-cost, flexible solutions that will free up time for you and your staff to spend on other in-house or client-focused services.

Not only can it provide a more secure way to run your practice, it offers instant, remote access to clients' IT systems, which can save you time and money and enhance your client relationships.

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