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1

Introducing cloud computing

Cloud computing may sound like a confusing, abstract idea but it can revolutionize the way you work and play.

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- 9** How cloud computing works
- 10** What you can achieve
- 11** Who is offering cloud services?
- 12** The possibilities of the cloud
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The author

David Crookes is a journalist who specializes in technology and videogames. The nature of his work means he is often out and about – computing in the cloud has made his life so much easier.

David began his career in 1994, writing for Amstrad Action magazine in the UK and his many credits since include The Independent newspaper, Computing Made Easy, Web User, Micro Mart, games™, Retro Gamer and the Guinness World Records: Gamer's Edition.

In addition to his writing, he is the curator of Videogame Nation, an exhibition celebrating the rise of gaming, which tours the United Kingdom.

Traditional computing

Many of us will have grown up using computers, whether for work or play. A very early memory may have been the use of tape cassettes. Although they were painfully slow, they allowed users to load and save programs and data to and from their computers. If they wanted to share a file, they would either hand over the master tape or make a copy on to another cassette. The more they wanted to share, the more tapes they would have needed.

Over the years, there have been many more ways to store programs and data:

- Those who wanted a faster and more efficient way of working had disk-drives. Whether they were 5.25-inch, 3-inch or 3.5-inch, these floppies were faster and more reliable. Over time, it was possible to buy 3.5-inch disks very cheaply too
- The dawn of hard drives meant being able to access programs and save data without having to resort to floppy disks. Once a program was installed then, for the majority of the time, the disk was not needed
- CD-ROMs, DVD-ROMS and Blu-Rays advanced the optical storage format. When it became possible and cheap enough for home and work computers to write to such formats, that too revolutionized the way we worked. Suddenly, we had portable mass storage
- Iomega Zip Drives and small USB sticks proved popular ways to back-up or port data

All of these methods, however, have meant that users have had to work from machines that have their required software installed or they have needed portable storage media to hand.

Without it, their programs or data are put out of reach.

It is something we came to live with but it had its downsides. Collaboration on projects has been more difficult – if you and a friend wanted to work on a Word document, for example, you would have to save it, pass it over, allow the other to change or add bits and then save and and pass it back.

That situation lasted for decades. But things have changed.

How cloud computing works

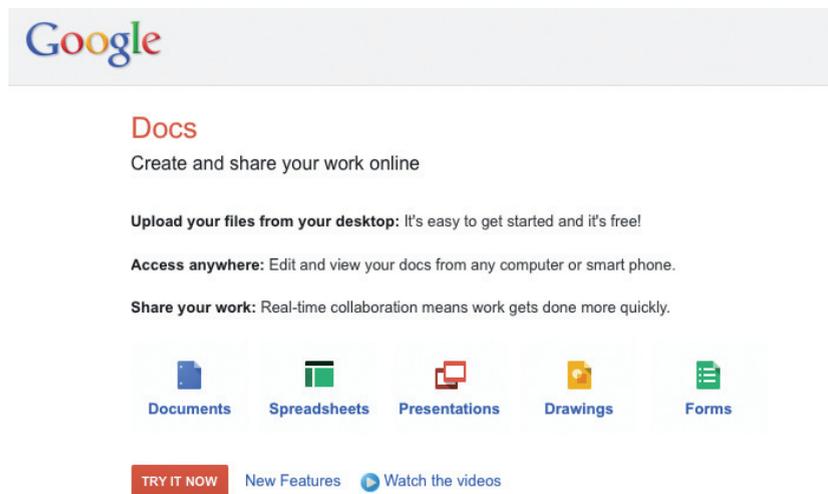
Cloud computing takes the emphasis away from local computers. It is less about the machine you use at home or on the move and more about what is happening on computers many miles away.

Instead of having to store information on your PC, smartphone or tablet, your data can be kept remotely. It will then be made available to any device that is capable of reading it.

Typically, most cloud computing is conducted via a web browser but there are other ways, including specially-made apps for computers, tablets and smartphones. These act as access points for cloud services. They also mean that you don't always need to have dedicated software installed on your machines.

The benefit of this is clear: suddenly you are not tied to your own computer. You do not even need to be tied to your own phone. All you need is a way of accessing the data and that be done from any machine.

As you can see, this differs from traditional computing because you do not need portable storage media nor are you relying on how robust or fast your machine is. With cloud computing, you are seeing programs and data being managed and provided as a service over the internet and it opens up many possibilities.



The screenshot shows the Google Docs homepage. At the top is the Google logo. Below it is the heading "Docs" in red, followed by the subtext "Create and share your work online". There are three main sections: "Upload your files from your desktop: It's easy to get started and it's free!", "Access anywhere: Edit and view your docs from any computer or smart phone.", and "Share your work: Real-time collaboration means work gets done more quickly." Below these sections are five icons representing different Google Docs products: Documents, Spreadsheets, Presentations, Drawings, and Forms. At the bottom, there is a red button that says "TRY IT NOW" and two links: "New Features" and "Watch the videos".

Hot tip



If you have an old laptop, why not turn it into a cloud computing station? As long as it can hook up to the internet, you will be able to comfortably run most cloud services.

Don't forget



Although many cloud services are accessed via a browser, there are often dedicated desktop apps as well.

Hot tip

Always look out for a phone app version of a cloud computing service you are using.

Don't forget

You can use cloud services to collaborate on projects with friends or work colleagues.

What you can achieve

Most people have been cloud computing to some degree for years. Web-based email is a prime example of items being stored on a remote computer, ready to be accessed via any internet-enabled machine.

But computing in the cloud has become more sophisticated:

- You do not have to install programs on your own computer in order to be able to use them. You could access a word processor through your browser and save your work to a remote computer. It wouldn't matter which computer you used – as long as you had the right log in details, you could access your document on any computer in the world or make alterations to it on your phone or tablet
- It is possible to remotely store any file. You can open a folder on your computer, phone or tablet and save items into it. This will then sync across all of your devices
- Keeping a diary becomes even easier. No longer do you need to constantly have a single diary to hand. You can make amends on your phone, jot details on your computer and see it all come together as one
- Photographs can be taken and viewed by anyone, anywhere simply by storing them in the cloud. You can do the same with video and audio. Indeed, you can have your entire music library stored remotely. This means no more worrying that you don't have your favorite CD to hand and no more feeling sad when you realize you have forgotten to move a song from your computer to your MP3 player

You can stream movies and games, write down notes and share your files and folders with others. You can access what you want, when you want it on whatever internet-enabled device you want it on, all because files are stored remotely.

Best of all, the companies which provide these services tend to make them run as simply as possible meaning fewer headaches.

You will certainly not find yourself fiddling around with complex installation settings.

Who is offering cloud services?

There are a growing number of companies offering cloud services including some very big names:

- Google

Google has a host of cloud-based services, offering users a word processor and spreadsheet as well as presentation and drawing tools. It also has a brilliant calendar which you can share with other people. It offers storage too

- Apple

The maker of the iPhone, iPad, iPod touch and Mac is very much an advocate of cloud computing. Its iCloud service puts your Mail, Contacts, Calendar, storage and even the ability to locate a lost phone at your fingertips

- Microsoft

You would not expect such a computing giant to be left behind which is why it is offering Windows SkyDrive. This allows the cloud to be used for storing and sharing data

And that is just the tip of a very large iceberg. With major cloud-based players such as Dropbox, Evernote and OnLive – a service that lets you stream top games direct to even the most primitive of computers and tablets – you can see how cloud-based computing has a very rosy future.



Don't forget



Many cloud-based services also let you access your files offline.

Hot tip



Download the Google Chrome browser to make good use of Google's cloud services. You can download it from <https://www.google.com/chrome>.



Don't forget



You do not always need a cutting edge computer to make use of cloud services. This is certainly the case with OnLive and Gaikai cloud gaming.

Don't forget

You need not be anxious about cloud computing. Most of us will have been using an example of it for years: web-based email. Hotmail, Gmail and many more store their messages in the cloud.

Beware

Do not upload illegal files to the cloud. This can get you into serious trouble with the law.

The possibilities of the cloud

So how can the cloud work for you? Well let us imagine a typical day for the average user:

- 1 Wake up to a text message saying you have a meeting at 2pm. Use your phone to add an entry for that time in your calendar. When you get to work later, it will be on your computer's calendar too
- 2 Reply to some overnight emails and write fresh ones using the details of contacts stored in the cloud
- 3 Open a cloud storage app on your phone as you travel to work. Make amends to a document and save it
- 4 Arrive at work. Open the document again, see your changes and make some more alterations. Share it with your boss so he can make amendments too
- 5 Collaborate on a presentation using Google Docs ahead of your 2pm meeting
- 6 Go for lunch. Have an idea and make a note of it in Evernote on your phone. Back in the office, open your computer's Evernote app and check other notes
- 7 Meeting goes badly. Open Spotify and play *Things Will Only Get Better* from the cloud for free
- 8 Read some documents on the train home and use a cloud-based print service to ensure they are on your home printer when you get back
- 9 Relax with your iPad, playing a blockbuster game streamed from OnLive
- 10 Remember you need to buy some tickets. Set a reminder using the mobile app *Remember The Milk*. See it when you get back to work on your computer

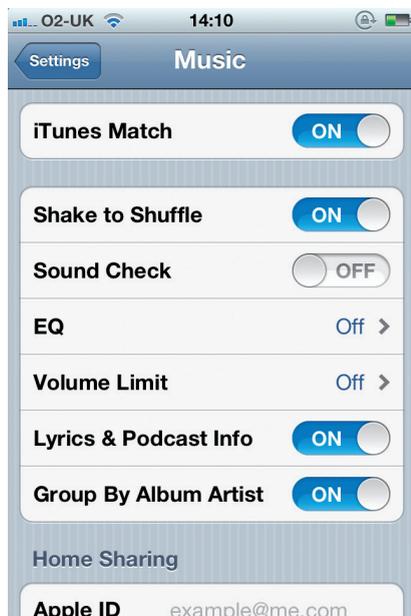
Wi-Fi and Broadband

To make good use of cloud computing, an internet connection is vital. Most people have broadband at home – certainly anyone reading this book will – but when you are working in the cloud, you will need a good connection outside of the home too. This will maximise your benefit of it.

Wireless internet

There are many Wi-Fi hotspots in towns and cities across the world and the number of them continues to grow:

- 1 Cafes, restaurants and public places such as libraries often have free Wi-Fi. Ask them for details of how to hook up
- 2 There are also companies which offer widespread coverage. The Cloud network in the UK, for example, has thousands of hotspots. The advantage of these is that you only need to sign-up once
- 3 Software is available showing you where the nearest Wi-Fi hotspots are. The free Wi-Fi Finder app by JiWire on the iPhone is a good example of this



Beware



When using cloud services, always be careful to log out when you are finished.

Hot tip



To use your laptop or phone with Wi-Fi, go to your Settings menu or Control Panel. Your PC, Mac, tablet or phone will look for Wi-Fi hotspots and prompt you for log in details.

Hot tip

As an alternative to Wi-Fi you could use 3G or 4G connections. It is worth considering a pay-as-you-go data package if you have a tablet computer that can make use of the phone network in your country.

Don't forget

Turn off your Wi-Fi if you do not need it, to save battery life on your laptop, tablet or smartphone.

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Of course, you can use the data which comes with your phone to access cloud services

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You can also tether your phone to a computer or tablet device. This will allow you to use your cellphone's data plan

6

Do be careful, however, if your data plan is limited. When you tether a phone, you will be eating into your service data

