

Cloud Computing and the Independent Gas Distributor

By David Schaer



The convergence of the internet, data centers, and virtual environments has opened up an exciting way to run your business. It's called cloud computing and successful businesses are finding this solution a perfect way to improve overall operations and service, while keeping costs at a minimum. Here's how it works.

The cloud is essentially a data center hosted by a company that can deliver services over the internet to many users. It is becoming an increasingly popular way for firms to offer computer systems, software applications, and data storage to consumers and businesses. Services are fully managed by the provider on their servers, which are remote from the customer's location. Access to the cloud is easy, requiring only a computing device that is internet or web-enabled. Common data centers may contain hundreds if not thousands of computers and include redundant or backup power supplies and data communication connections, environmental controls like air conditioning and fire suppression, along with high levels of access security. Cloud-based solutions require little or no software installation on the client's device.

In computing, virtualization is the creation of a virtual (rather than actual) version of something, such as a hardware platform, operating system, or storage device. Technology to create virtual computing environments is key to lower cost computing. With virtualization, computer systems can run multiple software applications on the same computer without compromising security or system performance, and 100 percent of the computer's system resources can be allocated across multiple applications, resulting in fewer computers to buy, manage, and service. Before virtualization, software systems had to be installed on separate computers due to individual application requirements, constraints, and system disruptions that occur during upgrades. With cloud computing, companies have the benefit of a private virtual business software environment that uses high performance computers and secure data centers at an affordable price—and it is all off site.

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Rich with Benefits

Today's business climate demands that companies run as efficiently as possible. Cloud computing allows even small businesses to enjoy the computing power that was once the domain of only very large companies, without compromising quality or customer service. By letting the cloud manage your software systems, customers reduce overall IT costs. The need to maintain an IT staff is reduced and in some cases eliminated as your cloud provider assumes the responsibility for ongoing maintenance, including operating system updates, security patches, network monitoring, and data backups. And large computer system investments and expensive software licensing programs are eliminated.

Typically a small initial fee gets you up and running with a cloud provider, followed by a minimal fixed monthly support and software application fee. With cloud computing, the software vendor guarantees you are up-to-date with the latest innovative technology, eliminating the challenge of personally keeping up with the latest technology, and in many cases, the need to purchase additional computers or software. This arrangement lowers the economic barriers to running powerful business systems.

A company's data is the life blood of the organization. Quality customer service and business analysis is next to impossible without credible data, yet many businesses overlook the importance of backups and restoration procedures in the event of a system failure. With cloud-based computing solutions, data is backed up automatically on a daily basis and typically stored off site for added business continuity in the event of a natural disaster, giving you peace of mind.

Key Considerations

Important items to consider when evaluating cloud-based computing solutions include checking on the proven track record of the provider and making sure the software application is maintained at a secure data center with redundant security, power, and internet connectivity. Customers should also know if 100 percent of their data is available to analyze independently or if it is limited to what the provider decides to expose. Be clear on what is covered by the monthly service fee. Does it include end user support and software updates to the current version? What is the data backup and disaster recovery plan?

At Computers Unlimited, our TIMS Online cloud-based computer solution provides clients with an all-in-one software system to manage the distribution, billing, and tracking of cylinders, welding supplies, bulk, packaged and specialty gases, and rental equipment. Already in use by several hundred clients throughout North America, TIMS is a proven solution to the independent distributor's IT needs and a great way to improve overall operations and service. To learn more, please visit us at www.cu.net. ■

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