

Cloud Computing - an Opinion Piece for The KnowList

Whilst preparing to write this article, I had to determine what cloud computing actually means to the legal IT community, what it would mean to the partners of a law firm and, most importantly, why they should be concerned about it. I started by thinking about how cloud computing impacts me personally.

I am currently in the process of installing a new sound system, having never bought any music from iTunes or the like on the basis that I can always retrieve the music I have paid for by going to the source... a CD. However, my new system hooks up to the cloud and allows me to utilise online subscription music services such as Napster. For a small monthly fee, I have access to millions of tracks which I can never lose because I don't own them in the first place and haven't had to host them on my own equipment. My PC simply acts as a passthru box (remember them ?) to connect my sound system with the cloud.

This is true cloud computing - I have no control over where the music is stored, I just use it as and when I want to and benefit from this flexibility for a monthly fee which is less than the cost of buying a full priced CD. The same approach works for applications and data - I don't have to know where it is stored, I just appreciate that it is always there when I need it so long as I keep up the payments! But I suspect this isn't the cloud computing that most law firms are looking for - what they are after is 'not on my site' computing. The cloud may provide access, but the servers, applications and data are sitting in a known data centre that I can visit if I really start missing my bytes.

The reasons for shipping servers out of a law firm's office can include cost (eg floor space in a premium location versus that of an industrial site, and/or more effective use of hardware), resilience (eg an external primary site and internal backup site, or vice versa), and expertise/management. At the end of the day we're talking about law firms - why would they want the overhead and risk of staffing and managing servers when IT specialists can do it better and more efficiently, especially given economies of scale ? So if that all makes sense, why isn't everyone doing it ? Part of this will be timing - if a firm has recently invested in hardware and environmental equipment, now might not be a good time to change horses. Some of this will be individuals who feel in control when they can see *their* kit in a room down the corridor.

However, the biggest barrier is still likely to be the idea of storing client-confidential data in a location not controlled by the firm itself (along with related Data Protection issues). Regardless of the irony that the best players in the cloud computing market can provide greater security than most law firms could ever muster whilst lawyers are happy to give sensitive documents to a courier dressed in lycra sporting more face jewellery than Lady Gaga, law firms remain uncomfortable with the concept of letting go. Although this attitude has softened over time and via increased familiarity with email (containing said sensitive documents) and internet research, the main change agent here is undoubtedly cost.

With margins under pressure and no immediate expectation of these returning to the heady levels of the mid noughties, cost control is balancing out concerns over client confidentiality. So what cloud computing should mean to the partners is controlled costs, along with the potential for improved access (if I can reach the cloud, I should be able to reach my systems) and solutions more closely aligned to the firm. This last point reflects an IT team which, freed of operational shackles, is now better able to focus on the business around it.

The last question then is why should partners be concerned about cloud computing. Well, if it is able to deliver lower costs and improved service to firms, those that embrace it have those that don't at a disadvantage. And, whilst law firms must remain focused on providing advice at levels appropriate to their client base, they must also be able to do this competitively - and cloud computing may be part of the answer here.

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