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Using the cloud for small business

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The cloud! What is it? Where is it? How does it work? Can I access it? Can I use it? These are some of the questions I get every time I talk about the cloud.

Although it can be confusing, the reality is the cloud in its most general form is easy to understand. How it affects you and your business is where things become interesting, exciting and confusing. Let me try to clear the fog around the cloud and give you some general concepts that should make the cloud as clear as a sunny day.

Where is the cloud? The easier question is: Where isn't the cloud? The cloud is not at your location. It is connected to the internet and located someplace else. In fact, any computer server that is not located on your premises is considered in the cloud. All you need is power and an internet connection, and you can access most

portions of the cloud from anywhere.

In addition to public clouds, where large server banks or giants like Google or Amazon exist, private clouds (as they relate to information-technology) are available to companies that purchase space in a data center, and then install servers with large storage capacity that allow access to this platform. Usually these data centers offer services including data backup, virtual machines and collocated servers, financial software, insurance software and the like.

Cloud services are becoming more and more popular for small business, but this comes as a two-edged sword. While it is great to have access to the latest versions of enterprise-style software like financial, planning or customer retention software for a nominal monthly fee, the downside is the monthly fee gets expensive over time. Businesses used to buy software and upgrade it only when absolutely necessary. Now, with the subscription model, businesses will pay far more over time than if the software was purchased outright. This is worth reviewing and determining if access to the latest software is worth the cumulative cost for your business.

Although there are some companies that choose to operate completely within a cloud platform, for most small and mid-size businesses, a hybrid approach works best. In this scenario, your business is not entirely in the cloud and not entirely on premise, but rather some services stem from the cloud and some come from on-premise servers at your location. This is particularly true if your business uses older and/or legacy software, which does not perform as well on a cloud platform. In these cases, a hybrid approach will allow the legacy software to run on premise but still be accessed by the cloud platform.

One of the biggest worries and problems with the cloud is a lack of access. While it's true that if you have no internet connection (due to a problem with your internet service provider or loss of power, for example) you can't access the cloud, you can always go to another location (home or a secondary office), login to the cloud service you rely on, and quickly regain access.

By customizing cloud solutions with the services your business needs, you can ensure more sunny days ahead for your business!

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