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What is the Cloud? Part 1: Introduction

I am sure most, if not all of you have heard of the "cloud", or terms like "cloud computing", or "cloud storage", but you may be wondering what exactly is the cloud? This is the first of several columns we will publish to help explain what the cloud is, how it works, types of clouds, and the benefits for you as a consumer.

The easiest way to explain it is that the cloud is essentially the internet. Anytime you access the internet on your laptop, PC, smartphone, TV, or any other device, you are interacting with the cloud. Another way of thinking about "the cloud" is that it comprises a global network of computer servers that store and provide applications, files, and programs. And with the help of cellular and Wi-Fi networks, the cloud can be accessed from virtually anywhere. This means that instead of having all the computer hardware and software sitting on your desktop, laptop or in your companies' network, it is provided to you over the internet as a service by a third party. These third parties (e.g., Amazon, Google, Microsoft, and countless others) utilize datacenters distributed throughout the world to provide computing power to users like you to access the internet. They can do so because they share resources (power, data, storage) resulting in vast economies of scale which is why they can offer services either free or at relatively inexpensive rates. Exactly where the hardware and software are located, and how it all works really does not matter to you, the end user – it is just somewhere in the "cloud".

Ironically, the way the cloud operates today is similar to how mainframes used to operate before the 1980's. Most work and data processing took place in large, expensive, and (at that time) powerful computers in datacenters. Often, you interacted with the mainframe through user terminals (CRT displays with keyboards). With the introduction of the personal computer in the 1980's, more computing power was made available in PC's and laptops. Finally, with the onset of cloud computing in the late 1990's and early 2000's, the industry moved back to a model very much like the mainframe. However, instead of terminals, you access the cloud through PC's, laptops, and increasingly powerful handheld and intelligent devices.

So simply put, the cloud means that instead of you having to store information, applications and data on your computer or mobile device, it is stored in the cloud and accessible anywhere you can get an internet connection. In this article, I hope to explain the cloud a bit more, how it works, and how you can create and use your own "private cloud".

Next week's column will discuss how clouds work and how you interact with the cloud in your everyday life and the benefits of the cloud.

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