

# Case Management in the Cloud - Cloud Computing, its benefits and pitfalls

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You're sitting in your office drafting a lengthy affidavit and you remember you have a great precedent stored on your server. You triumphantly double-click on your shared drive only to discover it won't open. You notice that the dust covered server in the corner of your room has ceased making that odd 'whirring' noise it had been making for the last 6 months, that noise you had subconsciously blocked out. A chill runs down your spine.

You call your IT guy and your fears are confirmed, you need a new server. £4k, £5k, £6k... £25k... Each quote gets bigger and bigger. But you are just a small law firm and hadn't planned for this in your budget, how can you solve all your server problems, keep costs down and keep working? It's time to look at the cloud....

## **What is the cloud?**

The cloud is quite simply data that is stored in a different location from where it is accessed.

Many of us use cloud technology every day. In fact we have done so for years without even knowing. Whilst 'the cloud' is a relatively new term, the concept has been in day to day use for much longer.

Hotmail, Gmail, Dropbox, iCloud, Internet Banking are all commonly used cloud-based technologies. In fact, based on the above definition, if you have ever viewed a website, you have used the cloud.

So why then are people so concerned about the cloud? There are now more and more providers asking you to store your data with them.

As with any competitive market, fear is often used as a marketing tool to differentiate between products.

## **The Benefits**

### **1. Lower infrastructure costs**

You can do away with the huge expense of managing your own server infrastructure. It's not only the upfront cost of purchase but the ongoing maintenance expenses. Thousands of pounds spent on a machine that is effectively a data repository can now all be spent on other, more important things.

### **2. Accessibility**

The cloud can be accessed from anywhere. Someone once told me they didn't want to be able to do work from home as this is family time. I asked them what time, on average, they leave the office each day. The answer - 10pm every night. In a world where businesses run around the clock, accessibility is the new key to a work/life balance.

### **3. Mobile workforce**

Having a flexible, mobile workforce is becoming the norm. There is no need to lose good staff anymore due to reasons like travel.

Implementing cloud technology allows all kinds of possibilities such as working from home and subcontracting administration work.

In a country where inclement weather is known to cause havoc, you have the ability to weather-proof your business. Flooding and snow no longer need to prevent your staff from coming to work.

### **4. Backups and Recovery**

Backing up your data is a crucial part of your business. In fact, your data is the only tangible source of good-will your business owns.

The cost of backing up data properly can be quite high and as a result risky, inexpensive (and often ineffective) options are sometimes used.

Over the years, I have lost count of the number of firms I have met where everything has been lost in either a fire or burglary and nothing could be recovered.

A great example of this was a firm I met who backed up their server every day to a USB drive. At the end of each day, the USB was locked in a fire proof safe... directly next to the server. One day they were burgled, they lost their server and naturally the safe, given that is where valuables are usually kept. Imagine the burglars shock when the safe was opened to reveal a USB drive. Worthless to the thief, priceless to the firm.

Even in situations where data can be recovered, you still need to arrange for a new server. Once the server arrives, it can take several days for any data to be fully restored.

The cloud means that not only are your backups taken care of for you, but in a disaster, your data can be recovered instantly.

## **The Pitfalls**

### **1. Data location**

Regulatory bodies for lawyers around the world generally have the same concern – where is your data hosted?

It is important to ensure your cloud provider complies with the rules and regulations as set down by your local regulatory body.

### **2. Unscrupulous providers**

I remember working with a firm that had outsourced all of its IT to ‘the local IT guy’. They had been sold on a ‘cloud’ solution which involved them logging in to a computer environment hosted by him.

The firm ran into regular performance issues and eventually this led to a bill dispute. The ‘IT guy’ simply reached under his desk and pulled the cable out of the machine that had been hosting the small law firms’ entire business environment. Not only had he brought the business to a standstill, he had no security at his house and a poor internet connection. Little wonder this poor firm had so many problems.

Thankfully they found a reputable provider and have now been working seamlessly in the cloud ever since.

### **3. Reliance on Internet connection**

Cloud products rely almost entirely on the Internet. Naturally when data is stored in a different location from where it is accessed, this is to be expected.

Unfortunately some areas have either poor connection speeds or suffer from intermittent performance problems.

A colleague of mine once told me of what he called the E36 cloud test. This was his test for determining whether a cloud product was worth purchasing.

The E36 is the name of the bus he catches to work. This bus traverses a number of mobile phone towers between his house and the office. He would launch the product on his laptop while still at home and commence using it. He would then take it with him and continue to work on the bus, right up until he arrived at the office. If he was able to work solidly from desk to desk, the product received his tick of approval.

Great cloud products accommodate a lack of a good Internet connection.

## **Avoiding the Pitfalls**

### **1. Research your Provider**

Research your providers' history. How long have they been in business? Are they a big business with lots of resources?

Always ask where your data is kept. The location should always comply with your regulatory bodies requirements.

Ask what security mechanisms are in place. Is the data in a secure facility? Is the data encrypted? Is there banking level security? The only suitable answer to all of these questions is YES.

Most providers can provide you with statistics on uptime. Great providers will make these available to the public as a show of confidence.

For real peace of mind, ask your provider if your data is stored in compliance with your local regulatory body.

### **2. Use a product with a Local Cache**

Great products will store data locally on your computer so that you can continue to work when you are offline, also known as a local cache.

This is a safeguard against Internet outages or poor connections.

### **3. Use a reputable Internet Service Provider (ISP)**

The best cloud software is designed to work with a modest Internet connection. In this day and age, there is no better substitute for an unreliable ISP than finding a good one.

Unplanned Internet downtime is very costly. Be sure to research your ISP and check its service maps. Such maps are usually available on a good ISP's website.

The money you save on your server would be well spent on investing in a great service from a great ISP.

### **4. The E36 test**

If you're still unsure, take the E36 test!