

# A Best Practices Point of View from



## Is Cloud Computing Your Best Solution?



## Is Cloud Computing your best solution? It's UP to you!

There is so much information circulating today about software in the cloud.

Like any technology, there are pros and cons to hosting software in the cloud. While the cloud is now the dominant model for delivering some types of software, it is currently not the case with much of the software that dental practices use every day. We know that cloud-based computing will continue to grow and evolve, but we'd like to help to address a few cumulating questions about the advantages and concerns of this software delivery model today.

When we hear the term "cloud", we immediately think "up". As if an angelic tech team were safeguarding our data and developing binary code in their spare time. The term cloud has been used for twenty years; it has always been a metaphor for the concept of sharing information via satellite networks – and the internet generally.

It has already taken on at least two meanings:

1. A computing model that supports large-scale information-sharing applications like search engines, Wikipedia and social media giant, Facebook; and
2. A giant wide area network housing unlimited operating systems, programs, applications and infinite data storage.

It's the second concept above that we focus on here: what we can think of as the communal server farm in the sky. In fact, the communal servers that make up the cloud do physically exist, on solid ground. They're created by companies like Microsoft, Amazon, IBM and Apple, running 24/7/365 in huge warehouse-size data centers around the world. They're linked and backed-up to each other, providing redundancy to minimize the risk of downtime caused by technical malfunction, power outages or other localized disasters. Technicians monitor their performance, handle preventative maintenance, troubleshoot and upgrade hardware and software as required. And therein lay the first two major benefits:

**Pro #1:** Cloud servers are purchased and owned by someone else.

**Pro #2:** Cloud servers are operated, maintained and backed up by someone else.

Running software on someone else's servers saves you much of the up-front expense of purchasing hardware and software. It may mean that you don't have to hire IT support for maintenance and troubleshooting. Business continuity and back-up will always remain your responsibility – you need to plan for connection disruptions and power outages – but the hardware is not your concern. When the server becomes obsolete or gives up the ghost, you don't have to foot the bill to replace it. Hosting software in the cloud is akin to renting versus owning real estate: you pay, usually by way of a monthly fee, for the benefits that someone else can provide to you through their investment. In addition to your payment, you agree to their rules and are impacted by their decisions.

**Con #1:** You do not control your server.

The decision to invest in a local server provides more flexibility and more control for a business: immediate, personalized IT support and managing back-ups does have its appeal. Some business owners prefer having control over the frequency, content, time and data span of their archiving.

Further, there's a certain peace of mind knowing that access to their software and data is not dependent on the availability and performance of their internet connection.

**Con #1:** You're as tethered to your data as your internet connectivity allows.

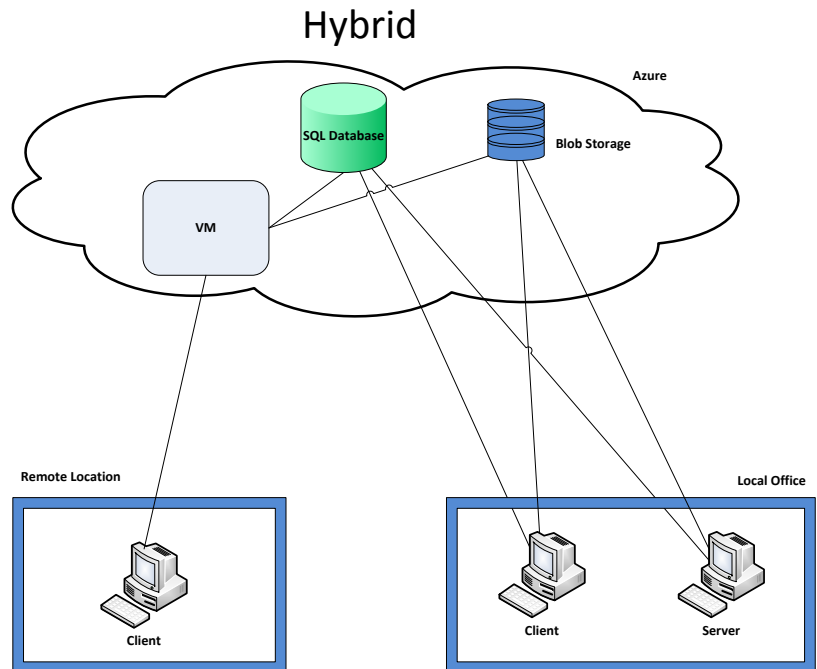
## The Mobile Availability Factor

## The Privacy and Security Factor

### Pro #3: On-the-go, multi-device access is fast and convenient.

Some people are concerned that security can be compromised and data can be hacked.

They are correct, in a way. The sheer volume of unrelated users accessing the same server network increases the opportunity for breach. But data in the cloud is no more – and no less – secure than electronic data stored on any local device, anywhere. If someone with enough sophisticated knowledge and enough time on their hands wants our data, there is always a chance that s/he will find a way to get it. High-profile organizations and celebrities



tend to become the target of extra-aggressive information seekers and are thus vulnerable to malicious hackers and media coverage.

For the rest of us, the sophisticated security resources dedicated to cloud solutions generally result in much better protection than local systems are able to provide. And good fortune would have it that several responsible, trustworthy providers have positioned themselves as frontrunners in offering cloud solutions. Millions of transactions are securely accomplished on a daily basis. If the world trusts any organizations to encrypt and protect our data and run reliable systems, Amazon Elastic Compute Cloud (Amazon EC2), Microsoft's Azure, Apple's iCloud and IBM's SmartCloud would be top choices.

**Pro #4:** Data is as secure as the providers you select and the measures you take to ensure it.

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## The Cost Efficiency Factor

As with the analogy of owning versus renting real estate, not only is the upfront cash outlay much less in adopting a cloud-based solution, the expense over time can be dramatically reduced. For small organizations in particular, there can be substantial cost savings in using communal resources. Rather than purchasing and maintaining server hardware, you can use only what you need and pay only for what you use. And, as already described, IT service and maintenance costs can be limited to managing client-side hardware and devices.

Monthly costs are usually determined on a per-user basis and fixed to cover your basic requirements, yet resources and services are available to scale up or down on demand.

**Pro #5:** Use what you need and pay for what you use.

For larger organizations, the decision to invest in a powerful local server still allows more flexibility and more control, and that

## The SQL Database Factor

## So is the Only Way UP?

investment is amortized over the life of the server. While monthly cloud access fees are relatively low per user, they can skyrocket for a company with many users. And any software licensing fees for your full network also factor into the monthly equation.

As dental practices accumulate ever more data and increasingly move to paperless practice, they require ever-greater processing power. Robust database management platforms like SQL, complex software applications and workhorse hardware and network IT upgrades are continuously required to maintain their system. The option to host data and/or software in a cloud-based server is now a reality that, for some practices, may be preferable to investing in a powerful local server.

Does the cloud represent the best solution for everyone? Not today. There are too many factors to consider for the decision to be that cut-and-dry. The size of your practice, the volume of your data, your tolerance for risk, and your preference for control, for starters, will weigh heavily in your decision. Your existing infrastructure and resources should also be considered.

We hope this quick overview of the pros and cons will help in your decision making.

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