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ADVISER: The cloud — that scary, hairy cloud

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Halloween is behind us, but demons still lurk for many small businesses as they seek success in the sometimes scary world of digital marketing.

One of the more intimidating subjects is "the cloud." You've heard the term but it is probably cloaked in mystery. It's that ghost lurking around the corner. Small and mid-size business owners often fear it. Facts are, however, those who leverage the cloud gain monstrous advantages. Just ask your children. They're all on it.

Cloud computing simply means using a network of computers rather than a single machine to store and process information. The result is information being available on-demand from any device. It doesn't mean computers are hovering in the atmosphere and magically devouring our data.

Many business people don't realize a majority of the technology we enjoy today is on the cloud.

If you use a mobile app, it is likely hosted on the cloud. The Chromebook your child may use in school is essentially a dumb terminal that interacts with the cloud. Google docs, apps and similar software services are hosted on the cloud. Have you used Dropbox, Netflix or Facebook? All on the cloud. Perhaps it's time for you to consider the cloud. What do you have to fear? Let's assess.

Security

Security is everyone's concern. Cyber breaches are common. Security breaches, however, are not specifically a result of the cloud. In fact, the security layers of reputable cloud systems are immensely better than what only a few corporations could ever hope to deploy.

Cloud infrastructures invest billions of dollars to ensure the highest level of security protocols. Almost all are PCI (Payment Card Industry) compliant, meaning they meet or exceed one of the highest levels of security measures.

PCI compliance and similar security certifications require physical security as much as data security. Because the cloud stores data on several servers — in different physical locations — your disgruntled employee can't just walk into your back room and take a server. Cloud server farms require multiple-level security clearance such as retinal scanning.

Analysts suggest up to 75% of the business data breaches are "inside jobs." Remember the Target credit card hack? Inside job. The Pentagon? Inside job. When your data is stored locally, there is typically little defense to keep an unhappy employee from walking out with his computer. When your data is on the cloud, it's far more difficult to breach data because it is not physically present at your business.

Of course, physical separation of data often raises the next fear: accessing your data at a moment's notice.

Access

Many business owners' concerns aren't security as much as access. There is a misconception that if the world wide web "goes down," having data sitting in the back room is the best option.

If your internet service goes down, though, it's going to be rather difficult to use your local data. Most of your data is now served up through a browser or software that requires an internet connection. If your machines are offline, you can't access any data, locally or otherwise. Having an internet outage is about as scary as an electric outage. These monsters appear infrequently, but they do show up every so often.

But here's a not-so-scary fact about access: If you have your data on the cloud, your data will be accessible at the closest location you can find internet service. We have had local outages at our company and simply by working from home, our smartphones or the local Starbucks, we were fully functional. If our data had been locally stored, that data would have remained unavailable.

Secondly, redundancy on the cloud is built in. It is the knitting of the cloud. Seamless data transfer, backups and accessibility make this "Frankenstein" no scarier than a butterfly.

Come out of the shadows and realize security and access is greater on the cloud than what could ever be achieved by hosting data locally.

And a surprise treat to using the cloud?

The cloud costs far less than traditional hosting — as little as a fraction of a cent per hour versus spending thousands for physical servers that are often out-of-date before they are even installed.

As we all become integrated digital businesses, cloud computing is the least scary option.

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