

Lost in the Cloud

“The Cloud” is getting a lot of press these days. It is rapidly becoming one of those buzzwords that make senior execs and cube-dwellers alike sound “with it” and “hip” and on top of the latest tech trends. “It’s on the cloud.” “We’re using the cloud here.” “I think a cloud-based solution might work best, don’t you?” Of course, there is still confusion out there regarding what exactly “the cloud” is, and what it means. (Obviously not among our tech-savvy readers, but still...)

Cloud computing – while a hot new topic – actually has its roots in the earliest days of computers. Predictions of cloud-like computing scenarios can be found as early as the 1950s! Yet this trend really took off in the early 2000s with the idea that software could be provided as a service, hosted remotely, rather than as a product that is purchased and installed locally.

The SaaS model of software distribution was key to the development and growth of “the cloud” as we know it today.

Yes, the truth is that, behind the hype, remotely hosted storage and application solutions really are on the rise and in demand. Today’s mobile society and the increasing reliance on smart phones and tablets almost make cloud-usage a necessity. After all, what is the point of having the perfect presentation or the perfect solution to a problem if that presentation or solution is locked up in a machine on your desk across town... or across the country! Cloud solutions give us access to the information we need, when and where we need it. That’s a powerful incentive to shift from traditional PC or server-based programs and storage to remotely hosted ones, isn’t it?

Plus, the cloud has opened an entirely new area of application development to solve problems that could not reasonably be solved by an office PC. Take, for example, one of my favorite Apps, WorldMate. This App is basically an all-in-one trip management system. When I book a flight, reserve a hotel room or rent a car, all the reservation info goes into my WorldMate account for a specific trip. The application manages my reservation info, keeps me on schedule with flight schedules and trip alerts, provides contact info and directions (as needed) for each leg of the journey, and even provides up-to-the-minute weather forecasts and currency conversions for each destination. The extent of the work on my end is forwarding the confirmation emails to my WorldMate trips email, and the application does the rest, building my itinerary and keeping me where I need to be, when I need to be there!

Without the cloud, such an incredibly useful application would be impossible. Sure, you could build an itinerary on your PC, using emails from your airline and hotel... but the info is still on your PC. Sure, you could set your computer to alert you when your flight is due... but you’d be out of the office at an airport or convention somewhere and never get the alert! The fact is, the mobile App is one of the most useful and productivity-enhancing inventions in years – yet without the cloud, the entire field of mobile App development would be stunted.

Looking ahead, the growth of cloud computing and App development show no signs of slowing or stopping. Until the next great innovation happens, we’ll all have our heads (and our data) in the clouds. In fact, cloud growth is becoming so pervasive that it is spreading into places that seem a bit ridiculous, at first -- like the kitchen. Many of today’s new “smart appliances” use cloud technology and local networks for ease-of-use and unheard-of new features. Refrigerators can tell you when you are low or out of certain ingredients and even order those items via online grocery stores. Ovens can provide cooking directions and even recipes. The ability of these smart appliances to do more than simply cool or cook is due, in large part, to their use of the cloud.



In our own industry, some see similar changes coming. In a recent edition of AVNation's AVWeek podcast, talk turned to the cloud and where it is headed in the AV world. Already the cloud has impacted our industry by changing how users interact with their world. In previous years, room control was accomplished via remotes or proprietary touch panels and button panels in the rooms. Now, thanks to the growth of the cloud and the embrace of App usage by so many, our control manufacturers need to provide smart phone and tablet Apps to interface with their systems and allow room control via users' own devices. Remote monitoring of rooms is now not only possible but expected by our users. One AVWeek guest opined that it is only a matter of time until we go to fully cloud-based room control and even switching!

Indeed, each year InfoComm brings another batch of new exhibitors with server-based control systems or innovative IT-like solutions for common AV problems. It's only a matter of time until one of these small-booth innovators hits just the right combination of innovative technology, AV marketing savvy and plain old good luck and takes our industry by storm. Hopefully our big control and infrastructure manufacturers (*cough* AMX, *cough* Crestron, *cough* Extron) have their ears to the ground and eyes to the front – with cloud solutions and innovations somewhere in the development pipeline.

The cloud isn't going away. There are naysayers who question the security ramifications of moving to the cloud, however, to quote Steve Wozniak at this year's FOSE show, "I simply ask those people, do you keep your money in a bank?" The cloud is already pretty secure, and more security measures go into effect daily as more and more applications head to the web. So, at the end of the day, "the cloud" is a new trend and a new buzzword... but it is also a new paradigm of how we do business and how we will live our lives in this new, connected world. Now is the time to educate yourself on this topic, because it is an idea whose time has come.

On résiste à l'invasion des armées; on ne résiste pas à l'invasion des idées. – Victor Hugo, Histoire d'un Crime

Literal translation: One can resist the invasion of armies, but one cannot resist the invasion of ideas.

Common translation: An invasion of armies can be resisted, but not an idea whose time has come.

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