

Associations Now

Home > Resources > Associations Now



Cloud Coverage: Pros and Cons of Outsourcing Your IT Infrastructure

ASSOCIATIONS NOW, June 2013 , Supplements

By: Karla Taylor

"Snowmageddon" led to the Council of Landscape Architectural Registration Boards into the cloud.

After the February 2010 blizzard dumped two feet of snow on CLARB's Fairfax, Virginia, headquarters, it took a week to regain power for the nine servers that its association management software (AMS) and other computer systems depended on. The message from the weather gods was clear: "We had to change," says James Penrod, CAE, CLARB's deputy executive director. "We couldn't let this happen again."

With no one on CLARB's staff of 13 dedicated to information technology, Penrod and his colleagues hired a consultant for an IT audit. They talked to fellow association executives and vendors about technological solutions that would reduce risk, increase security, maintain predictable costs, and provide better data backup in the event of yet another "blizzard of the century." Then, in 2011, CLARB moved all of its computer infrastructure except one small server into the cloud.

"It was a lot easier than I thought," Penrod says. "It should be a mantra for association executives: Focus on your strengths. With no IT staff, we didn't have any strengths in that area. Putting this in the hands of experts really made sense for us."

Since the term was coined in the 1990s, "the cloud" has become a reliable and convenient solution for many organizations. Yet for some, the concept is still foggy. Tech marketing consultant Lenna Garibian offers this clear definition: "a computer network to store, access, and share data from internet-connected devices." Another straightforward explanation comes from Chris Poeiker, author of *Storage Area Networks for Dummies*: "Simply a way to describe how organizations can take some or all of their existing IT infrastructure and operations and hand it over to someone else."

Is handing IT over to the cloud a good idea for your association? If you're curious but unsure about relinquishing control to something so vaporous and distant, here's an overview of advantages and disadvantages, plus some advice about what to look for—and what to look out for.

Advantage: Possible Savings

When you access your AMS and other systems through a cloud provider, you gain economies of scale by using shared systems that allow your vendor to spread its costs among its clients.

Those efficiencies can bring you enhanced services for the same price or less. That's why Brian Bruffey, CEO of cloud-based AMS provider Protech Associates, Inc., says the cloud is an especially smart choice for associations with fewer than 100 staff. The cloud "brings world-class technology to a market that historically has not had big budgets and staff," he says.

The prospective savings made it easy for Dean D'Ambrosi, vice president for member relations at the National Association for Printing Leadership (NAPL), to convince his board to convert to the cloud as part of a 2013 IT overhaul. From eliminating in-house servers to reaping greater efficiency from a new AMS, he estimates annual savings of approximately \$100,000—plus improved customer service thanks to seamless functionality in the new system. NAPL plans to divert half the savings into hiring a new database manager who will focus on the data, not the technology.

Another advantage is that your costs should be easier to predict, and thus easier to budget. Many cloud-based vendors operate under a subscription-for-service, or pay-per-use, model. Once you determine your needs, the contract with your vendor usually entails a monthly subscription fee. This also allows you to spread costs out over time instead of paying all at once for major capital expenditures for hardware and software.

Disadvantage: Possible Unpleasant Surprises

Make sure you understand exactly what your contract covers, since costs and coverage vary significantly from vendor to vendor. In addition, realize that you probably will rent—not own—your software. If you terminate with your cloud provider, not only must you find a new home for your data, but you leave your software behind.

Solutions:

When considering cloud computing, "the decision needs to be made from a strategic standpoint, with the input of your finance department," says Duke Witchel, manager of managed services and IT at Aptify. That's why you should lay the foundation with due diligence about your AMS needs first. Then make sure the AMS provider's cloud solution fits your needs and budget. (If you already have an AMS, make certain it will work within your cloud solution.) Ask questions such as:

- ❖ Does your cost cover full end-to-end service by subscription?
- ❖ What forms of support and maintenance are—and are not—included?
- ❖ Does your vendor's fee include updates as new releases emerge?
- ❖ Exactly what is the cost of extra services we may need later?

Advantage: Greater Reliability and Availability

"People are always concerned about their data—an association's biggest asset besides its people," says Bruffey of Protech. "Your data are more secure in a data center managed by IT experts who know how to maintain it, keep it current, and deal with licensing, backups, malware, and redundancy—things many associations are not typically equipped to manage internally."

Witchel of Aptify agrees. "The cloud is especially good for organizations that have critical applications on the web that require minimal failure and maximum uptime," he says. No doubt you consider it critical to enable your customers—at any time, from anywhere—to register for your convention, buy your books, and update their records. However, your IT staff may not be available to respond 24/7. Cloud providers often tout their disaster preparedness and 99 percent uptime.

Disadvantage: Internet Dependence

Your ability to use the cloud is only as good as your internet connection. In addition, data security is one of the stormiest challenges the cloud presents. How can you be sure that your data, including credit card data, are safe?

Solutions:

If you're worried about your internet connection, consider backing up your primary internet provider with a secondary provider. (To learn more about security basics, see "Sample Questions About Cloud Security" on page 11.)

Though he doesn't downplay concerns about cloud security, Penrod lends some perspective. "Think about the environment in which most associations keep their data," he says. "Often it's in a closet in the corner of their office—hopefully air-conditioned, and maybe with some kind of lock, but not monitored 24/7/365. We feel like our data is really much more secure now."

Advantage: Increased Flexibility

You can prepare for seasonal demand by working with your vendor to scale up and down as needed or on a set schedule. This was a major attraction for Penrod, whose systems get especially heavy use three times a year when test takers are registering for CLARB's exam.

Disadvantage: Loss of Control

For many associations, the best thing about in-house infrastructure is that trusted staff members can tailor their systems to specific needs. Some cloud vendors will not customize their products. For those who do, the price may seem prohibitive.

Solutions:

Make sure your cloud provider's technical capabilities are indeed adequate. For example, Witchel recommends doing load-testing, checking to make sure the system you've signed up for can handle your heaviest convention-registration day.

In addition, ask your vendor whether it's possible to customize and, if so, exactly what it will cost. Also find out whether the business processes you don't want to change will transfer seamlessly into the vendor's software framework.

Focus on Priorities

Penrod of CLARB points out what may be the biggest plus of outsourcing IT and software management to the cloud: It can free you up to concentrate on your members.

For the National Association of Colleges and Employers, the decision to move its existing AMS and CMS systems into the cloud "was a no-brainer," says Aijaz Khan, NACE's director of IT. Of course leaders were pleased that the move would save an estimated 30 percent on hardware and software over five years. But even better, members of the three-person IT staff no longer spend their days maintaining software and updating servers. Instead, they concentrate on mission-critical work, such as project management and creating apps for NACE events.

Ideally, a cloud-based system will let your staff think about improving your business processes instead of maintaining your IT system—in other words, advancing your mission. As Protech Associates' Bruffey says, "The cloud allows you to focus on what you do best: Take care of your members."

Karla Taylor is a communications consultant based in Bethesda, Maryland. Email: karlataylor@earthlink.net

Sidebar: Sample Questions About Cloud Security

If you're considering moving your AMS or other systems to the cloud, it's vital to do your due diligence about security issues, including the safety of credit-card data and personal information. Here are three must-ask questions from Christopher Stark, president and CEO of Cetrom Information Technology, a cloud-computing service provider.

- ❖ **Is your cloud environment secure?** For example, how secure is employee access? Do you always encrypt client data when transmitting to and from your data center?
- ❖ **What certifications do you possess, and how often are your services subject to an independent audit?** A data center should meet the SSAE-16 standard and have a tier-4 rating. Ideally, the center should undergo an independent audit annually.
- ❖ **Where are your data centers located? How much of my data will go to another country?** Your vendors should invite you to tour a data center, and you should do so. Ideally, your data will have both geographic redundancy and data redundancy. In other words, the data should be replicated in several locations so that it will be preserved in case of disaster. And if your association is located in the United States, you want your data to be, also. That way, your data will be protected by local and federal laws and held to National Institute of Standards and Technology standards.

Learn more from a Cetrom blog post titled "[How to Choose a Cloud Computing Provider: 10 Questions You Must Ask.](#)"

Rate this item:

Comments:

Rate this item:

[Sign in to write a comment](#)



[Please Sign in to rate this.](#)