Are You Working in the Cloud? - 1

by Vanessa Kier

Okay, you're thinking as you read the title of this article. I'm a writer. Of course I'm working in the clouds. That's where my inspiration comes from, right? The cloud of imagination and dreams that traps writers and keeps us away from reality.

Nope, that's not the cloud I'm referring to. *The cloud* is all about technology. Specifically, the cloud is a remote data storehouse, usually a server or a connected set of servers, that allows a user to access resources and perform tasks: a) from a variety of devices and b) without investing heavily in local hardware or software. This means that the provider of the cloud service invests money in high quality, high capacity servers, sets up levels of backup and redundancy to protect the data from theft or other loss, and provides the software that performs the bulk of the work. All the user needs is a device that can access and run whatever application is being offered.

Businesses have long used Local Area Networks (LANs) to give workers access to a core set of files stored in one central location. Log onto the network and you can view and edit files that your coworkers have created. Businesses also use the cloud to store resource-dense programs, such as databases. Workers install a pared-down version of the software on their workstations. Then, accessing the server via the LAN, they can utilize all the features of the main database program, plus the extensive data itself, without having to actually store that data locally. An additional benefit is that multiple users can access the data at the same time.

How does this apply to writers?

You're probably using some type of cloud application without even realizing it.

If you have an e-mail account with Gmail, Yahoo! or Hotmail, you're working in the cloud. The content of your mailbox is stored on the provider's servers and you can access your account from any device with a web browser. Cloud e-mail applications such as these also allow you to sync your account with multiple devices. That way all your devices have access to the most current data.

The beauty of a cloud application is that you can access the data from any computer, smartphone, or other compatible device. So if you lose your smartphone while at conference, and you left your laptop at home, you can borrow a friend's computer and check your e-mail from their web browser.

What will you do with your conference photos? If you're like many writers, you'll upload them to online photo sites such as Flickr, Shutterfly or Picasa. Yep, these are also cloud applications. The providers are not only storing your photos, but they're giving you the tools to crop, enhance, and compile your photos into masterpieces ready to be shared with your fans, friends, and family. Again, all you need is a compatible device with web access. You don't need to load any special software onto your computer.

Online storage sites such as Mozy and Carbonite use the cloud to store backups of your data. They do require you to download software onto your computer so that the program can check your files and prepare them for upload to the backup server, but this software takes up minimal resources compared to

the bulk of the data you're backing up. Your data is saved on servers physically far removed from your location, but easily accessible by you from any computer with internet access.

Dropbox is another example of a cloud application. It allows you to store documents on its server, access those files via the web, and share specific files with other people via an e-mail link. It also syncs any changes you make to the files across all your connected devices.

But what if the person you're sharing the Dropbox file with doesn't have the necessary application on her computer to open the file?

In that case, you might want to try sharing files created through Microsoft Office Web Apps or Google Docs. These programs are accessed via the internet and allow you to create and view documents even if you don't have a word processing program on your computer. These are not the most robust programs. The Microsoft Word Web App, for example, has only a few of the features of Word 2010. However, both Microsoft Office Web Apps and Google Docs possess the ability to perform basic formatting tasks. Plus, you can upload current documents and edit/view them through the web application.

The key selling point of these web applications is accessibility. Because the documents are stored on Microsoft's and Google's servers, you can access them from any computer. You can also share documents with selected users regardless of whether the other user has the appropriate software installed on her computer, because she can work with the file in the online application. So, if you're collaborating with some other writers on a piece sharing your conference experiences, you can post your document to your online folder, share it with your collaborators, and you'll be able to see their changes. All without having to e-mail the file back and forth.

If you're on a limited budget, having access to cloud based applications allows you to purchase a less robust, and therefore more affordable personal computer. (Although the one area you will want to invest in is high speed internet access, particularly if you'll be backing up your files or uploading photos to an online site.)

In summary, the cloud stores your data and gives you access to it from any compatible device, no matter where you are.

So now when someone tells you to get your head out of the clouds, tell them "No way!" Then explain all the things the cloud can do for them.

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