

TOWARD PERSONAL SELF-RELIANCE: Soaring into the Cloud?

by Vic Berecz

Like it or not, computers play an increasingly important part in all of our lives. Actually, except for a few old codgers of my generation, the world has largely accepted that fact. One pet peeve of mine is the disdain held by so many computer users, of all generations, for understanding the basic concepts (such as file systems) that ease the burdens and mitigate the risks of working with computers. Now I know I have an advantage, having started using and programming computers more than a half-century ago. But, I feel that each of us needs to have some tangible feeling of control over the things which are important to us. Without that, we're just living a life that is a *total crap-shoot*, and we all deserve greater fulfillment than that. Therefore, I've chosen computing ... and its newest twist *The Cloud* ... as the topic of this first essay on personal self-reliance.

Computing in *The Cloud* means having the software you use, and your data files "out there somewhere" ... with *Microsoft* or some other vendor. As a result you do everything via the Internet ... other than the Internet browser, you don't need any software or data on your own physical computer. I will not make any recommendations regarding migration of your computer usage to *The Cloud*. Whether you represent a small or large business, or are just an individual personal user like me, you'll have your own cost, privacy, and security considerations to help you make that decision. Here, let's just examine some of the issues and finally come back to address that "feeling of control" that comes about when you exercise a reasonable degree of self-reliance.

The *Cloud* concept has many advantages for you the user. Your computer can be a lot less complex and expensive because it has become simply your human interface device to the Internet. It really does no "computing" ... all the hard stuff, whether number-crunching or video-editing, is done *out there*. You have virtually no software maintenance issues on your computer ... the latest and greatest version of every piece of software you need is waiting for you *out there*. You don't have to concern yourself with backing up your data and other such mundane, but often forgotten, tasks ... it's done for you automatically *out there*. It doesn't matter where you are or what computer (is *work station* a better term) you're on ... since the software you use and all your data is *out there*. Yes, there are advantages gained by users soaring into *The Cloud*..

Needless to say, the *Cloud* concept also has many advantages for the vendor ... or else why would they all be pushing it so hard? Think of the millions of users ... business and individual ... still running the almost decade-old *Windows XP*. We've been denying income to *Microsoft* for a long time! *The Cloud* will end that. Your software will always be the latest and greatest ... and in all likelihood it will be metered. Instead of paying one license fee when you buy each software product, you'll pay a usage fee every time you use the software product. Of course, the usage fee will only be pennies ... but, boy how those pennies will add up! Your data is also up there in *The Cloud* ... so the vendor has the opportunity to charge you for the storage capacity you use. Again, only pennies ... but, they add up. The fact that the vendor will have physical control of your database ... even assuming they will protect and back it up adequately ... means that you won't be able to casually change vendors. This gives cloud-services vendors a great deal of pricing flexibility. So, is *The Cloud* mutually advantageous? It is, so long as you, as a user, don't see a big downside to these vendor advantages.

As with most things, *Cloud* computing has a downside primarily associated with cost and risk. From a user perspective, we examined above the cost issues in a general sense, and one risk issue ... potential cost increases to what will likely become a *captive audience*. Beside cost, what is at risk? Clearly the key element is your database. We all have what businesses consider *mission critical* data ... the information that, if lost, could sink a business or in the case of individual users devastate their psyche. By way of an example, in my personal situation, there are three sets of data whose loss would upset me greatly ... my personal financial records and my collection of digital photos (these two are probably common to most of you), and my family tree database, since genealogy is my passionate retirement hobby. My principal concern relative to these databases is not so much privacy ... as you know, I believe the world has basically given up privacy in exchange for convenience ... but rather, my concern is the risk of loss.

What happens to my data if a cloud-services vendor goes bankrupt? What happens to my data if a cloud-services vendor's facilities are destroyed? What happens if a cloud-services vendor prices me out of the market? What happens if the communications network to the cloud-services vendor is down for an extended period? I'm sure you can think of many other similar questions.

I don't know yet whether I personally will go to *The Cloud* for computing services. In fact, we all may have little choice if the entire world moves in that direction. But one thing I know for sure, if I do choose *The Cloud* I will keep a copy of my "mission critical" databases in my physical possession ... and (just as importantly) that data will be in "standard" formats that are not specific to any vendor's software product. This degree of personal self-reliance will give me that tangible feeling that I have a reasonable degree of control ... enough to preclude loss of the information that is important to me. How about you?