

# Partly Cloudy with a Chance of Perception



Photo of Skydive Kansas general manager Jeremy Struempf, also USPA state record holder of "Most Jumps in One Day" of 101 jumps. Taken by jumper Marcus Denniston.

**O**h no. You left it at the office. That irritating feeling of "I feel like I'm forgetting something" had a valid source. The file you need right now in this meeting is on your other computer, and you missed putting it on your thumb drive. All your preparations crumble with just one missing electronic document. If only a magical unicorn could fly you back really quick to go get it....?

In the unfortunate absence of supernatural single-horned winged horses, there is an equally miraculous solution: being in the cloud.

## What's "in the cloud"?

With current tech jargon thrown around, incessantly changing, the average person could get lost. Something that used to mean existing around a visible body of very fine water droplets suspended in the atmosphere now means, storing and accessing data from an indeterminate server using a standard internet connection. The connotation of cloudy often implies confusion, yet in this case, the analogy extends more towards a fluid, flexible area, ungrounded, accessible from multiple locations.

Regarding "being in the cloud", the only disadvantage is online access. In remote areas if you do not have a cell phone signal for mobile access, or if your internet connection is poor or non-existent, the most recent contents in your cloud may be inaccessible. On the other hand, if your online access is generally reliable for the most part, the advantages far outweigh this singular yet imperative problem.

## How does it work?

Very simply, a cloud is a place for you to store files of almost any kind on a server instead of on the hard drive of your computer. It is akin to having your own computer located "out there" somewhere, as if in the clouds! Not only do you have access to files from any device, as a supplemental backup solution, the cloud is an easy way to protect important files from a hardware failure or physical disaster. Different cloud solutions offer slightly different amenities in order to set themselves apart from the competition, which enhances the services you receive.

Some solutions offer online creation of documents, using applications housed on the server. This means you could create spreadsheets, formatted text documents, slideshow presentations, and more, without having to purchase or install any software on your computer at all. You simply use your web browser to create and save files directly in the cloud. For example, Microsoft's SkyDrive allows users to create MS Word, Excel, Powerpoint, and OneNote files natively without a copy of Office installed on your computer. Google Drive also supplies users with its version of this

popular software, and will even convert MS Office files to its format if you choose. Purchasing the pricey Office Suite can now be a thing of the past.

Other perks some cloud companies offer include a web console coupled with a desktop application. Instead of using a browser such as Chrome, Internet Explorer, or Firefox to access your cloud, this feature provides for a customized interface installed on computer. Possibly the result is a more streamlined way to see your cloud files, but there is not necessarily any additional functional gain.

Offsetting the disadvantage of needing internet access is a feature called auto sync. Many solutions allow users the option to have their files stored both on their own computer hard drive and in the cloud, supplying an automated synchronization to a specified folder so you can always have a copy on your computer as well. One minor usage limitation to note, however, if you change or add a file offline without internet access using one device – such as a desktop computer – it would not sync until you got back online. Hence, that file would not be available automatically on a different device, such as your cell phone until that sync occurred.

As you might expect with an idea that allows you to access files from any location, the ability for mobile

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devices such as cell phones or tablets to interface with your cloud is another important feature to consider. Not all solutions provide mobile access for every device. For example, Google Drive has yet to create an app for iOS, leaving iPad and iPhone users out of the game. Knowing your particular needs can help you choose a solution fitting your requirements.

**What does it cost?**

As seems to be the philosophy of most technology providers, every feasible cloud solution offers a certain amount of service FREE! Yes, that would be completely no charge for an incredibly useful service. What's the catch? Storage space continues to become less and less expensive, so the competition is high. In addition, solutions try to upsell users by capping the amount of storage available. Generally, the casual user can reap the benefits of the free options simply by being organized and frugal with space, remembering to clean out unused files periodically. If an organization sees a need to purchase additional space, cost is reasonable but varies, anywhere from \$30 to \$150 annually for increased storage. Another upsell gimmick is offering additional perks such as photo gallery interface, email clients, or other functionality. DropBox even offers more storage for simply referring friends. Despite few issues with security, a trade off for users is privacy. While legislation protects users from

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## What are some options?

Google Drive	DropBox	Box	SkyDrive	SugarSync
drive.google.com	dropbox.com	box.com	skydrive.com	sugarsync.com
Photos, videos, documents integrated with other Google Cloud products	Photos, videos, documents	Photos, videos, documents	Microsoft Word, Excel, Powerpoint, OneNote	Photos, Videos documents, music streaming
Web Console and Desktop App	Web Console and Desktop App	Web Console	Web Console and Desktop App	Web Console and Desktop App
Andriod	Andriod, iOS, Blackberry	Andriod, iOS	Andriod, iOS	Andriod, iOS, Blackberry
<b>5GB free plus 10GB gmail, 1GB Picasas</b>	<b>2GB free</b>	<b>5GB free</b>	<b>7GB free</b>	<b>5GB free</b>
Auto sync cloud with hard drive	Auto sync cloud with hard drive	Cloud only	Auto sync cloud with hard drive	Auto sync cloud with hard drive

being singled out individually based on the data in online accounts, marketing giants like Google take data mining to the full limits of the law and collect anonymous data for marketing research, giving them an edge to elicit advertisers seeking good search engine visibility. Some users fear these practices and shy away from enjoying free services, yet security of your individual documents has not shown to be compromised. Privacy and security are not synonymous, so your personal preference of how much generic privacy you surrender for the value of the service is the crux.

### One step further...

Alone, the fact that an individual's files can be instantly accessible from any device is enough to cause even the most dispassionate to jump for joy. Yet when it comes to efficient productivity, the ability to collaborate kicks the cloud concept to the top of the list of "Wow, That's A Great Idea!" No longer do organizations need to purchase expensive exchange software to implement project collaboration between team members. Gone are the days

of users downloading a copy of a file, checking in with changes, saving revisions in confusing stacks. All cloud solutions currently available allow customizable sharing, including sharing with the public, allowing viewing for anyone with a link, limiting access to specific users logged in for viewing, or even specifying which users can also edit files. This makes document changes in real time.

### The best part

Aligning with the layman's definition of cloud, comprehending exactly how the cloud works or where your files are can be a bit, well, cloudy. Good news. It is so easy that you don't have to understand it to use it.

*Since 1997, Jen Sharp (JenSharp.com) has served business and government across Kansas and the US and even internationally, specializing in Web development, design and programming including e-Learning, ecommerce, content management systems, and other small business solutions.*



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