

# Cloud computing's ubiquity brings down prices

January 5 2012, By David Sarno

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If you've ever had your laptop stolen, watched your toddler baptize your PC with Pepsi, or had your MacBook come to a cold, dead stop, you know that the digital memories we store on our home computers are anything but indelible.

But now there's a special place coalescing where data never dies: It's called the cloud.

Internet giants [Google](#) Inc., Amazon.com Inc. and [Facebook](#) Inc. have relied for years on cloud computing, where information is split up and stored across [large networks](#) of remote servers, rather than all in one place. When storing a holiday dinner photo, for instance, Google slices it into many shreds of data that are then duplicated and sent to dozens of data centers all over the world. That way, if one data center melts down or has a long [power outage](#), your family portrait can be reassembled from the pieces still stored in the center's surviving peers.

The good news is that as the Internet has gotten faster and data centers have multiplied, the price of storing files in the cloud has dropped. For many consumers, storing copies of all of your music, photos and documents in the cloud is now an affordable option - and one that will protect you from waking up with your memories erased.

Take Carbonite, a cloud backup product that for \$59 a year will create a complete online copy of your computer, so that if you lose any file - or all your files - you can restore it through a Web browser. Once you

install the automatic backup application on your computer, Carbonite will make sure to copy every new file to its servers, so you never have to upload anything manually. If you accidentally delete a file from your computer, you have 30 days to access the backup before Carbonite deletes the file too.

Amazon also has a set of cloud storage services. Its Cloud Player will let you upload your [music collection](#) to the Internet so that you can access it from any of your computers or [mobile devices](#). The software automatically searches your computer for music files and uploads them all into nice, organized categories.

Amazon has a more general storage service called Cloud Drive, which allows you to upload and store videos, photos, documents and other files. The service is free for the first 5 gigabytes of storage. That's enough to fit about 1,000 MP3 music files and 1,000 photos - a good start, but probably not enough to hold your entire collections. For a monthly fee, you can upgrade to larger accounts, from 20 gigabytes (\$20 a year) to 1,000 gigabytes (\$1,000 a year). For most people, the latter would be enough for complete collections of your photos, music and documents, as well as a few shelves of full-length movies.

The Cloud Drive has a bothersome limitation, though: Instead of an automatic upload feature like the one Carbonite has, you have to manually upload files, which makes loading hundreds or thousands of files extremely time-consuming. At this point, it's best for a limited number of files, perhaps the ones you'd most like to have copies of.

Google offers a similar service through its Google Docs feature. You can upload most kinds of files to your Google Docs list, up to 1 gigabyte, free of charge. Its prices for more space are lower than Amazon's: \$5 a year for 20 gigabytes and \$100 a year for 400 gigabytes. You can go up to 16 terabytes for \$4,100, but that's more than you'll need unless you

store a lot of high-quality video.

Apple has a somewhat more limited system called iCloud, which tends to store only documents or music files that you create or purchase through Apple. Unlike with Amazon or Google, you can't upload music files that you didn't purchase in Apple's store, nor can you back up your work documents if they weren't created on Apple's word processing tools. iCloud does have an interesting tool called iTunes Match, however, which will scan your music collection and, if the songs are available on iTunes, will create a virtual copy of your music collection in the cloud that you can access from any of your Apple devices.

A caveat to prospective cloud users: Although your data will be safer from accidental deletion in the cloud, other concerns about this new technology remain.

Companies like Amazon and Google are sometimes vulnerable to outages, during which large swaths of their cloud servers go off line, sometimes for hours or days, rendering huge amounts of data inaccessible.

Those storing highly sensitive data - business plans, invention blueprints, compromising photos - may want to hold off for now: The cloud is secure, but it's no Fort Knox. Unlike in a locked safety deposit box at a bank, your cloud data will often be accessible to some employees at the company storing your data. Moreover, the cloud can be hacked just like any other computer system, and security researchers believe that cyber criminals are likely to ramp up cloud attacks in the coming year.

But for regular old family snapshots, [music files](#) and writing drafts, the cloud is providing an affordable and convenient way to keep your digital stuff safe.

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