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Is Hybrid Cloud Storage the Answer for Your Storage?

Understanding these ins and outs of hybrid storage could help your law firm or legal department with its storage decisions.

Charles Koo, Innovative Computing Systems, Law Technology News

January 20, 2017

Before moving forward with new data storage, law firm management and IT directors must consider several factors when evaluating options. Yet most firms only consider two options: on-premises or cloud storage. Many don't even know about the third option: hybrid cloud storage.

By developing an understanding of hybrid cloud storage, law firms can determine whether it is a practical solution to the ever-increasing need for additional storage space.

What Is Hybrid Cloud Storage? Everyone is familiar with local and on-premises storage, e.g. the workstations/laptops, file servers and storage appliances in the server room at the office. In recent years, public cloud storage has increased in popularity, with services like Google Cloud, Microsoft Azure, and Amazon Web Services (AWS) being used for both personal and company use.

And then there's hybrid cloud storage, which, put simply, is the use of both local and cloud storage for data management.

Why it's Practical: With hybrid cloud storage, firms have additional flexibility by using both local and off-site storage for their business needs. This practice can result in potential cost savings and increased data protection. Traditionally, if your firm was running out of storage space, you would need to predict future storage requirements and pay upfront for storage-related hardware.

In contrast, cloud storage shifts spending from capital expenditures to operational expenditures, as there is no additional equipment to buy. Further, cloud service providers take care of the back end (maintenance, patches and updates), which frees up the IT department to work on other tasks. The cloud is built on virtualization technology, which means you can add more disk space as needed and pay as you go.

While there is much attention focused on cloud storage, local storage should not be discounted. The latter may be appropriate where high performance access to data is expected and where tight control over the data is needed. If your firm isn't on Office 365, for example, your mailboxes are likely on local storage in the server room. Or perhaps you have applications that require intensive processing along with stringent security requirements to meet compliance issues that your IT team can manage better if the data is controlled fully in-house.

Some firms use cloud storage to supplement their file servers. Vendors such as CloudBerry offer solutions where cloud storage can be mapped to lettered drives that people are accustomed to using. In other words, cloud storage can be mounted and presented as local storage. With a fast, reliable Internet connection and modest disk performance requirements, such file storage solutions can work well. For example, you may see a network drive labeled "F:\Programs" that points to a local server and have an "I:\Archive" folder that is on cloud storage.

Data and archives that require less-frequent access are good candidates to place in cloud storage. For example, data related to closed cases or workstations/laptops slated for retirement could be stored in the cloud to free space on your local storage. Policies can be created by your IT department so that inactive data can be automatically archived to less expensive cloud storage designed for this purpose.

The hybrid cloud model also works well with data backups. These days, backup systems are stored locally, but also replicate the backups to cloud storage. That way, you can restore recent data more quickly when needed (as that data would be on-site), but still have access to older data in the cloud.

Data Availability and Storage Needs: While your IT department has control over local storage design and availability of local storage, cloud storage availability depends on offerings from the service provider. Fortunately, cloud storage is highly available and scalable. Data is stored across multiple, geographically separated facilities/devices for redundancy. And for flexible storage needs, cloud storage supplements local storage by offering additional storage on demand, without requiring users to buy more hard drives or a new local storage system.

Business Continuity and Disaster Recovery: The resiliency offered by the cloud applies to hybrid cloud storage when set up properly. Local data can be backed up to the cloud, protecting your firm's data against local disasters. Your data is protected because multiple copies exist in multiple data centers. And if data is lost locally, you can retrieve it from the cloud.

Security, Compliance and Auditing: Cloud vendors are aware of security and compliance concerns. And while cloud vendors have strong security controls in place, they generally promote a shared responsibility model.

Cloud service providers like AWS are responsible for securing the infrastructure of the cloud, such as the underlying hardware, software, networking and facilities that run various cloud services. Data in transit and at rest is generally encrypted.

A company or law firm using cloud services is typically responsible for users' security policies, account management and permissions granted, as well as the information that users upload to the cloud. It's important to read the fine print, though, as company responsibilities vary among providers.

Additionally, as with security, there's a shared responsibility model for audits. If your organization goes through an audit, cloud service providers, such as AWS, will offer their annual certifications and reports (ISO 27001, PCI-DSS certificates, etc.). In general, the cloud vendor is likely responsible for the infrastructure, such as securing hardware in the data center. On the other hand, you may need to provide to auditors what your firm has put onto the cloud, such as virtual servers, database instances, applications and possibly the data itself. Review the security and compliance-related documents from your cloud service provider for specific details that apply to your firm.

In short, hybrid cloud storage is a compelling option worthy of your consideration. If your firm is not already in the cloud, hybrid cloud storage is a good place to get started, as everyone can use extra storage. You can supplement your local storage with cloud storage to save on costs, free up space on more expensive storage solutions and extend your data resiliency through file services, data archives and backups in the cloud.

Charles Koo is a Senior Systems Engineer at Innovative Computing Systems with over a decade of experience in the IT field. He lives in the San Francisco Bay Area and his technical interests include cybersecurity, cloud and virtualization. He can be reached at ckoo@innovativecomp.com.