

THINK PRIVACY

Monthly Privacy Advice from the NYS Consumer Protection Board

Do Not Let Your Privacy Disappear in the Clouds

You may have heard of the term “cloud computing.” Cloud computing is the process by which your computer’s applications run on someone’s server, which is accessed via the Internet. Yahoo e-mail, Microsoft Hotmail, Facebook applications and spreadsheet applications like Zoho are all examples of cloud computing. Google, Yahoo, Microsoft and IBM are all major players in cloud computing.¹

You likely use one of these services now and as technology advances, your use of these applications will perhaps increase. But have you thought about the serious privacy implications that come with cloud computing? Have you thought about who owns your e-mails? Your pictures? Your on-line journal? And with whom all of this information is shared?

There are many unanswered security and privacy questions that consumers should think about when cloud computing. Who has access to your data? Can your data be bought and sold? Can a host deny access to your own data?² What happens if the host company goes out of business, what happens to your data it holds?³ And, most importantly from a privacy standpoint, how does the host protect and secure your data?⁴

When you lose physical control of your data, there are associated privacy and security risks. Cloud computing increases the risk that a security breach may occur.⁵ As a result of the practices of others, your data could be lost, stolen or compromised. Some companies could even willingly share sensitive data with marketing firms.⁶

Thus, it is important that you acknowledge the potential risks and questions associated with cloud computing before engaging these services and that you pay close attention to the privacy and security policies of the hosting company to understand your rights.⁷ It is also imperative that consumers understand the contractual agreement created when using these applications, which may help answer some of the questions raised. Cloud computing is a powerful approach to sharing resources in a highly connected world.⁸ But like many innovations in today’s digital environment, it is paramount that one evaluates the costs before jumping into the clouds.

¹ Alert: The Privacy Implications of Cloud Computing, Privacy Rights Clearinghouse, September 12 2008, <http://www.privacyrights.org/ar/cloud-computing.htm>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Cloud Computing: Bill of Rights, Sam Johnston, September 22, 2008, <http://wiki.cloudscommunity.org/wiki/CC:boR>.