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Cloud backup best practices: Evaluating cloud backup services

Cloud backup services are now considered by many to be the way to back up moderate (less than 1 TB) amounts of data, including backing up your data at home. The challenge is that a new cloud backup vendor seems to pop up every day. How does one select a service from among so many vendors? Which of the cloud backup vendors is right for your data backup and recovery environment?

In this tutorial on cloud backup best practices, learn what you should look for in potential cloud data backup services, questions to ask potential vendors, management and security concerns, and cloud backup services that are popular with larger enterprises.

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What should you look for in a cloud backup service?

The first question you can ask to help "thin the herd" is to look at the platforms supported by the cloud backup services in question. All of them are going to support Windows, of course, but not all of them support Linux or Macintosh OS. If you have either of these platforms, your job of selecting a cloud backup service is going to be much easier. Be sure to investigate the maturity of their support for the platforms in question. For example, did they just add support for MacOS, or has it been there for a while?

The next set of questions has to do with the financial viability of the company. You've heard the phrase, "On the Internet, no one knows you're a dog." I'd say the cloud backup world has a similar phrase, "On the Internet, no one knows you're one guy with a PC and a DSL connection using rsync to back up other people's data." The likes of Google AdWords can literally make a mom-and-pop backup service compete directly with market leaders. Be sure to investigate the financials of any company who is going to be protecting your data.

Cloud data backup security and management

In a similar vein, ask many questions about a cloud data backup service's infrastructure. The well-established cloud backup services now have petabytes of data under management. How is all that data stored? Is it replicated to multiple destinations? It's going to be a disk-based system, so how are they protecting against the inevitable --disk failures in the backup system? Is there a backup for the backup?

Any good cloud backup vendor supports encryption of your backups before they leave your site. Do they allow you to set your own encryption key, or do they manage the encryption key for you? The former is more secure, of course, but the latter is one less thing to manage. However, if they're storing the keys, how are those keys protected?

One of the main reasons for using cloud backup is that you literally no longer have to worry about managing your backup system. The idea is, it's just going to work, and if it doesn't work, someone's going to tell you. Ask your vendor how true that is. How and under what conditions will you receive notifications that something is wrong? Can you set thresholds? Can you do so by client, location, data type, etc.? Are the notifications via the software, or are they going to send email notifications? Do they provide a reporting portal for you to look at all your backups and how they're doing? What happens if someone uninstalls the software on a client being backed up? Will the system notice, or will it simply stop backing up?

Two types of cloud backup services

Cloud backup services fall into two groups. There are those, such as EMC Corp. Mozy, where the software and the service are inseparable. If a company is reselling Mozy to you, it is simply just reselling EMC's Mozy service. There are also those, such as Asigra Inc. or Vembu Technologies, where the software making the service possible is provided by one company, and many service providers use that software on their own hardware to provide their own unique service. There are arguments for both of these types of services. If you like the product, but not the quality of customer service, the latter type of company would allow you to switch service providers without having to reinstall new backup software. But you might prefer the more "monolithic" approach where one large company, such as EMC, is handling the product and the service.

Does the vendor offer an initial seeding option? The first backup of hundreds of gigabytes over the Internet can literally take months to complete. Does the vendor have a system in place to allow you to perform the first backup (referred to as the seed) via some mechanism other than the Internet?

A similar question has to do with large restores. If you need to restore hundreds of gigabytes over the Internet, it may be quicker to ship it than to download it. Do they offer that service and how much do they charge for it? What are the logistics? Do they ship you DVDs, a disk array, or tapes? What does the workflow look like once you receive the shipment?

One final, important thing to consider for medium to large enterprises is whether or not the system can be eventually in-sourced. At some point, your monthly bill may become too much. Is it possible to eventually buy the hardware and software used by the system and bring the management of the backup system in house? Most cloud backup vendors do not allow this, but some do. The more data you plan on backing up, the more it is important for the vendor to be able to offer you this service.

Professional cloud data backup services

Below is a list of some professional (as opposed to those for home and consumer use) cloud data backup services. It is far from being an exhaustive list, of course, as there are literally hundreds of cloud backup vendors. We have tried to select those who seem to be discussed by a majority of users.

Professional cloud backup services: A sampling

- Asigra Inc. Cloud Backup
- Backblaze
- Barracuda Networks Backup
- Carbonite Inc. Pro
- CrashPlan Pro
- i365 EVault
- EMC Corp. MozyPro
- IBM Corp. Information Protection Services
- Iron Mountain Digital Services
- Symantec Corp. Online Backup
- Vembu Technologies StoreGrid
- Zmanda Inc. Cloud Backup

Resources from Iron Mountain

White Paper: Why Cloud Backup: Top 10 Reasons

ESG Report: Cloud Data Protection for Midmarket and Midsize Enterprises

Video: Cloud Data Protection

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