

Cloud services: How do they compare?

By Cailyn Finkel, 7/3/15

Finding a way to share photos, videos and files between computers, mobile gadgets and friends can seem like a complicated, confusing process. In the old days, it meant cables and proprietary software. Thankfully, the cloud makes it a snap, but it does introduce the problem of too many choices.

The cloud is not a fluffy white mass of water vapor in the sky, it's actually just a fancy name for the Internet and company servers. Just about every major company has a cloud service of some kind that provides a benefit to you. Cloud storage, for example, is a great way to access and share your computer's media library remotely. If you save documents, videos and photos in the cloud, you'll be able to reach them at work, on your laptop while traveling, or on your phone or tablet wherever you are.

Not only does the cloud allow you to get to your files online, it also lets you share with friends and family. You can make folders public or send links for others to view and download specific files. There are even options for cloud storage for businesses. Share proposals, tax files and other confidential files quickly and securely online. The online services and gadgets you already use can help you decide which cloud service is for you, but it still helps to compare them.

Let's take a look at what services are available and what they can do.

Google Drive (drive.google.com)

Google Drive is great if you're already a Google user, say for Gmail or Google Docs, but even if you aren't an existing Google user signing up is no big deal. This free cloud storage system gives you 5 gigabytes of free online storage, and Google Drive users have the ability to buy even more storage as needed.

With Google Drive, 25GB will run you \$2.50 per month (or \$30 per year), and you can purchase up to 16 terabytes of cloud space for \$800 per month, assuming you want to digitize and store a big chunk of the Library of Congress. Most day-to-day users won't need that much space but it's always nice to have the option to buy more when you need it. You can install the online storage drive on your desktop computer, smartphone and laptop. Syncing documents from your desktop to your mobile devices is as simple as dragging and dropping files into the folder on your desktop or home screen. Once you put an item into Google Drive, it automatically syncs to any other Drive-enabled gadgets. Sharing information with others is as easy as sending file or folder links through email.

Drive does especially well on Android gadgets, as you would expect with both being from Google. You can add it to Apple gadgets, but it isn't quite as tightly integrated.

Dropbox (www.dropbox.com)

Dropbox is another trustworthy cloud storage site that puts an emphasis on keeping your documents protected. Plus, it's been doing this the longest, having started in 2008. It gives you 2GB of space for free when you sign up and you can earn even more storage when you recommend others to sign up for a Dropbox account.

If 2GB isn't enough space to store your stuff, there are a ton of options to upgrade your memory limit. You can pay a monthly fee of \$9.99 to get 100GB of cloud storage, \$19.99 for 200GB and \$49.99 for 500GB. There are also yearly payment plans that save you about 17% a month, depending on the one you select.

Dropbox doesn't skimp on security. It has been hacked in years past and learned from it. That's refreshing at a time where it feels like there's another major hack every other week. Dropbox automatically encrypts every file you upload so you can rest assured that your private documents, photos and videos won't get into the hands of hackers. The site and accompanying app are available for both Apple and Android gear as well as Mac and Windows operating systems. That means you can transfer and save files across any device anywhere with a Wi-Fi connection.

Like Google Drive, you get a folder on your desktop or home screen and dragging files to the folder uploads and syncs them automatically. Because Dropbox is a third-party product, it works equally well everywhere.

iCloud (www.apple.com/icloud/setup/pc.html)

iCloud is the online storage program available to all Apple users. It comes pre-installed on all Apple products. If you have one, I'm sure you've seen the prompt to sign up or sign into your iCloud account. iCloud makes it easy to transfer and view files across your iPhones, iPads and iMacs. You get an initial 5GB free and can purchase more space if and when you need it. The first upgrade is about \$1 a month, and that ups you to 20 GB of iCloud space.

You can purchase up to 1TB of space on the cloud if you need it for \$19.99 a month. Use the space to backup store your photos, calendar events, documents, notes, contacts and whatever else you can think of.

As you might have noticed above, iCloud is almost exclusively for Apple products, although it can work in a limited fashion on a PC through iTunes. If you have non-Apple gadgets, you'll want to find another option.

OneDrive (onedrive.live.com/about/en-us/download)

With Google and Apple in the cloud storage business, you won't be surprised to hear that Microsoft has a cloud storage option as well. It's undergone a number of name changes over the years, most recently changing from SkyDrive to OneDrive.

Anyone who has ever signed up for a Microsoft account (Hotmail, Outlook or Live) has this cloud storage program automatically. Microsoft phone owners have OneDrive installed on their gear and their files are automatically stored on OneDrive, just like iCloud does for Apple users.

Windows 8 and Windows 10 are also tightly integrated with OneDrive. When you sign into Windows using your Microsoft email account, your OneDrive files are available automatically. In Windows 10, OneDrive is even included in the main file browser window, and adding files to OneDrive is as simple as dragging and dropping.

In the spirit of expanding OneDrive's usefulness, Microsoft has made it compatible with Macs, iOS, Android and even BlackBerry. It also works seamlessly with Office365, Microsoft's online version of its popular productivity software. You get 15GB of free storage when you sign up, which is the largest amount of initial free storage that I know of. That's plenty of space to share your photos, videos and business and personal files. Like the other options, you can email links to share items with friends, family and coworkers.

Amazon Cloud Drive (Free with Amazon Prime account)

The last, but certainly not the least, online storage program is Amazon Cloud Drive. This is a strong choice if you're an Amazon Prime member or have an Amazon Fire tablet.

If you already have an Amazon Prime account, you get 5GB of Amazon Cloud Drive space free and unlimited photo storage at no additional cost. I absolutely love both online shopping and taking photos, so that's a big draw. If you aren't a Prime customer, Amazon offers unlimited photo storage as well as 5GB for other files for \$11.99 a year, after a free 3-month trial.

Once you sign up, you can download the program and app on your computer and all of your gadgets; it's compatible with just about everything, although it's most closely tied to Amazon's own gear. Like Dropbox and Drive, the program and app makes it simple to upload and sync files.

A major warning

We've been talking about cloud storage, but a lot of people confuse that with cloud backup. There is a major difference, and one that can cost you if you aren't careful. Cloud storage is about moving your files to the cloud so you can access them anywhere. It doesn't necessarily create a copy on your computer or gadget, which means if something happens to the cloud service your files are gone. Cloud backup creates copies of your files, so you have them on your computer or gadget and in the cloud. That way, if something happens to either one you still have a copy.

Links to some cloud backup options: (From <http://www.cloudwards.net/comparison/>)

www.justcloud.com www.backblaze.com www.crashplan.com www.carbonite.com www.mozy.com