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WE HEAR A LOT THESE DAYS ABOUT CLOUD COMPUTING, SOFTWARE as a service (or SaaS) and hosted software services. Should you move your practice up into "the cloud"? The underlying concept of "the cloud" returns us to the early days of computing. Back then, "dumb" terminals accessed computing power and storage on mainframe computers. Then we moved to a personal computing world where our computing power and storage happened locally on PCs connected to networks.

In the late 1990s we saw a movement back to an evolved version of the earlier model, but built on the Internet. This was known as the application service provider model. With ASPs, you used a browser to access a website where you kept and worked with your data.

In those days, there were performance issues and other problems with ASPs, and they were blasted when the dot-com bubble burst. In fact, the term *SaaS* was substituted for *ASP* because of the negative feelings caused by the ASP-bubble era.

At least four major changes have happened since then:

- Widespread adoption of broadband Internet access.
- Programming known as AJAX, a method of Web-based scripting that makes user input appear quickly and permits webpages to act and feel like desktop applications.
- The build-out of today's world-class data centers.
- The public's comfort with hosted e-mail such as Gmail, and Web 2.0 tools like Google Docs.

All of this has brought us to the era of "the cloud." In popular terms, "the cloud" refers to two related things. First, the websites and services that allow you to use the Internet as a platform to run programs and store data. Second, the system of worldwide data centers owned by Amazon.com, Google and others on which these Internet services run.

The term "cloud" is used because in this system, which includes things like virtual servers, it actually becomes a little difficult to point to exactly where all your data is being stored or managed. It's definitely not in your firm's server room. You also do not install the software you use on your own computer. It's accessible on a website through your browser.

Many law firms find the idea of SaaS quite daunting. According to the ABA's 2009 *Legal Technology Survey Report*, 16 percent of respondents have

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