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The cloud whips up a storm

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<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/500d197e-b5da-11dd-ab71-0000779fd18c.html>

People in London know all about clouds and have 37 ways to describe them ("dirty great", "nasty looking", etc). But another cloud, for which there is no proper description, has drifted across the global horizon.

Up to about a year ago, I heard hardly anyone mention "the cloud". We knew of "cloud computing", a futuristic concept that would see all IT applications accessed via the internet from users' relatively dumb terminals.

Now, suddenly, everyone is talking about the cloud as if it were a familiar landmark. But it isn't: what it means is little understood.

So let us think of it as the internet with bits added. The internet is merely a network; the things that travel across it - services, web pages, etc - are created and reside elsewhere, in datacentres or back bedrooms.

Now, the internet is sufficiently fast and reliable for big, mission-critical applications to travel across it. From the user's point of view, this makes being connected to the internet the equivalent of accessing a giant mainframe - you need very little computing power on your device because all you need sits "somewhere else". From the perspective of those offering services, such as applications, or storage space, it simply means hooking up their data centre to the network for anyone to use.

So "the cloud" turns out to be a handy way of describing this fast-growing and increasingly commercial collection of datacentres linked to the internet. It looks a bit like, and indeed encompasses, some forms of software-as-a-service, utility computing, and the like.

The implications are potentially vast, with the easy availability of cheaper, bigger applications opening up new sources of computing power to businesses, for example. But is this a cloud with a golden lining - or a storm cloud? E-mail your verdict to digitalbusiness@ft.com and I'll discuss our joint findings in the next edition.
