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When Heidi Woodhead, vice president of technology assurance at Boise-based *PreCom*, talks about clouds, you can be assured that she is not talking about the weather.

Small and large businesses are experiencing tremendous turbulence in trying to keep company information secured and safe, but at the same time, extremely accessible.

Cloud computing is essentially a data-processing infrastructure in which the software and the data are stored on remote servers, Woodhead said.

These servers are connected to the Internet rather than a PC or a company's LAN. When one needs to use some form of software application or access data, the computer connects to the remote server through the Internet.

So what do clouds have to do with all this?

The cloud is a metaphor used to describe as well as represent the Internet in computer diagrams.

The explosive growth of the Internet has fostered the idea of shared data infrastructure. Cloud computing is more prevalent than one might think and most people don't even realize they're operating in this fashion, Woodhead said.

"Have you ever created a profile on LinkedIn or Facebook or sent an e-mail from Yahoo? If the answer is 'yes,' you have engaged in cloud computing," she said. "The data that was created resides on a remote server instead of on your PC or other form of conventional hosting."

She said to put it simply, cloud computing includes server processing, data storage, security and voice applications, which have tremendous advantages. These services are offered by Premium Communications in Boise.

First and foremost, cloud computing enables small to mid-sized businesses to leverage storage space and application solutions without having to make significant capital expenditures on hardware or infrastructure, she said.

"As a company needs more storage space or software they can pay as they go," Woodhead said. "In other words, providers offering cloud computing offer services based on utility such as Amazon.com's \$3 subscription, or a flat monthly fee."

Software as a Service (SaaS) is another advantage of cloud computing because companies can tap into solutions hosted on the Internet such as Salesforce.com.

Easy collaboration is another great benefit of cloud computing services.

"With both the application and the data stored in the cloud it's easy for multiple users to work together on the same project" anytime, anywhere," she said. "This gives companies with virtual employees extreme flexibility as well as enhanced productivity."

Furthermore, she said, depending on the provider, the data and applications stored in the cloud in most situations have complete disaster recovery. The information is protected by multiple, geographically dispersed data centers with extensive backup, archive and failover capabilities, she said.

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***Highlights: PreCom***