Whitepaper

Financials Face-off: On-Premises vs. Cloud

Why now is the right time to graduate to the cloud

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Introduction

The modern construction financial manager's balancing act

Construction financial managers (CFM) today balance the need to manage an increasing level of business complexity with the need for speed. You're expected to keep your eye on multiple entities across multiple regulatory frameworks and multiple currencies. Think that's complicated? Now add frequent change to the equation. A monthly or quarterly financial check-in isn't good enough for today's CFM. You need the agility to make decisions at a moment's notice—and those decisions must be based on the real-time financial truth.

With an increasing number of people working remotely, being able to close your financials, run reports, make decisions, and keep up with the myriad of changing regulations is paramount. Is your on-premises financial management software helping you grow and compete—or holding you back? This paper will help you understand whether it's time to make a move to the cloud. You'll discover:

- Why most financial software systems hinder your ability to get good financial information.
- The six key questions you need to ask before considering a move to a cloud-based financial solution.
- Why the process for evaluating software is different for cloud solutions—and the seven things to make sure you've got in your service level agreement.

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Ask yourself...

Have I outgrown my on-premises solution?

Sage 100 Contractor, Sage 300 Construction and Real Estate, QuickBooks Desktop, Microsoft Dynamics, SAP, Oracle all pre-date the cloud.

Financial management and accounting software date back to the late 1980s, following the shift to Microsoft Windows. Every major financial software package developed during that time arose from this transition. Sage 100 Contractor, Sage 300 Construction and Real Estate, QuickBooks Desktop, Microsoft Dynamics, SAP, and Oracle all pre-date the cloud.

These systems were built with the technology available at the time, when the pace of change wasn't as exponential as it is today. While your current solution may have exceeded your needs at the time, as your organization scaled, rules and regulations began to change at a dizzying pace, and access to real-time information became table stakes, you may have begun to outpace what your system could provide.

And that's why so many companies are evaluating if now is the right time to make the move to the cloud. There are many variables to consider when evaluating whether your current financial management solution still meets your needs. So let's explore, in a bit more detail, some of the advantages of a cloud-based financial management solution and some of the tell-tale signs that you may be outgrowing your on-premises solution.

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Your first decision

Choosing a software delivery model

Just like Google, Amazon, and online banking, cloud-based financial applications are built for the Internet age.

If you are considering a new financial management system, there's one decision you need to make early on: which delivery model will provide the best performance for your organization.

Here's a high-level overview to help you understand your three main options, followed by a chart with more details.

On-premises solutions. With this traditional model, you license software and run it on your servers. When considering this model, be sure to account for the capital and operating expenses associated with deployment, operations, support, customization, integration, maintenance, and upgrades. While these costs can be too great for small and mid-sized construction firms to sustain, on-premises solutions remain a viable option for some larger businesses. These organizations often have a built-out IT infrastructure, investment capital, and expertise to support and maintain major software applications.

Hosted solutions (single tenant). In a hosted environment, the software physically resides at a remote data center operated by an expert third-party hosting provider. Your team would usually use a product like remote desktop software to access the software over the Internet and see the screens being generated at the hosting provider. This model eliminates the responsibility of maintaining hardware infrastructure and therefore can help you avoid large upfront capital expenditures. But it works by providing you with a unique "instance" of your financial system on a dedicated server. That means you would still face the same costs for customizations, upgrades, integration, support, and service.

Cloud solutions (multi-tenant). Just like Google, Amazon, and online banking, cloud-based financial applications are built for

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for the Internet age. Also known as “software as a service” (SaaS), these applications offer direct, always-on access to the solution, typically paid for on a subscription basis. This is a multi-tenant environment, which means system resources are shared across customers, but your data is safely secured separately from other customer data. This approach provides consistently high quality, scalable performance for all customers at any given time. There are no upfront fees, capital investments, or long-term commitments because you do not buy, license, or manage the underlying hardware, software, or networking infrastructure. Upgrades are performed by the provider at no additional cost.

Considerations to keep in mind as you determine the right path forward:

	On-premises software	Hosted software	Cloud/SaaS
Application development	Developed for the client/server, Windowsbased computing.	Runs on-premises software in a third-party data center and adds a layer for online delivery such as a remote desktop client.	Developed from the ground up for online delivery.
Deployment	Installed on the customer’s hardware.	Installed on a third-party vendor’s hardware–delivered via an internet connection.	A single vendor both develops and operates the applications–delivered via an Internet connection.
User interface	Designed for desktop machines in a client/server environment.	Same as on-premises, with an extra layer for presentation such as a remote desktop client.	Designed from scratch for the Web environment, to match the paradigm users expect and are familiar with.
Upgrades	As needed with lengthy installation process.	Same as on-premises.	Continuously with no install necessary.
Integration	Potentially time consuming and costly depending on the nature of the integration.	Same as on-premises.	Readily available.
IT Support	Generally provided by the customer.	Same as on-premises, but supported by third-party hosting vendor.	Generally included in the subscription.
Multi-tenancy	Not multi-tenant. Each instance of the application requires its own hardware/software/networking environment.	Same as on-premises.	Multi-tenant design to deliver optimal product performance in an online environment.
Hardware requirements	Requires a specific operating environment. Users typically limited to Windows only.	Same as on-premises.	Delivered via a Web browser so generally operating system and browser-agnostic.
Accountability	The vendor is responsible for the software, the IT department is responsible for operations.	Hosting providers and software developers are two different organizations so accountability is complex. The IT department is still responsible for operations.	One vendor provides an end-to-end solution, so accountability is inherent.

Considering cloud

Is the cloud right for my construction business?

Many construction firms that are adopting cloud financials provide real-time dashboards for their project managers, so everyone can see the key performance indicators that apply to their projects.

The cloud offers compelling and unmatched advantages for deploying business software, particularly financial applications. Instead of continuing to invest in antiquated, on-premises systems, leading construction businesses have turned their focus to SaaS and cloud-enabled software because they need flexible and agile financial applications that are relatively easy to implement, configure, and update. Demand for cloud-based financial applications continues to grow because of the ability to access and analyze massive amounts of data in near real-time. With speed as a guiding factor to winning business globally, organizations want, and need, more from their finance systems than ever before, and that includes using the most up-to-date and advanced systems found in SaaS and cloud-enabled finance systems. *(Source: IDC MarketScape: Worldwide Cloud and SaaS ERP Accounts Receivables and Accounts Payables Applications 2018–2019 Vendor Assessment)*

While your next financial solution very well could be a cloud solution, it doesn't have to be. And it certainly should not be a choice based on "what everyone else is doing." Is the cloud right for your construction business? Conduct a quick check with these six questions.

1. **Does my team need to work outside the office?** "Anytime, anywhere" accessibility is a key benefit of moving to the cloud. The whole back office team can work anywhere—in the office, at home, around the corner, or the world—using only a standard and secure Web browser and an internet connection. You don't need extra security hardware or software, or a VPN connection. In today's business environment, this has never been more important.

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2. **Does my business need to accelerate financial processes—without increasing headcount or IT budget?**
High ROI and rapid payback are common with cloud applications. In a recent study by Nucleus Research, cloud-based financial management and accounting implementations were found to deliver 3.2x more ROI than on-premises software.

   Considerable financial advantages come from avoiding the capital investments and operating expenses associated with an on-premises system. But cloud systems also drive higher ROI through time savings and process efficiencies. Since cloud systems are inherently Web-based, live, and real-time, they greatly accelerate crucial financial processes like collections, consolidations, and period closes. Plus, modern cloud-based systems offer extensive automation and integration capabilities. You can go a long way toward eliminating productivity busters like manual data entry, paper-based processes, and spreadsheet maintenance.

3. **Does my financial system need to integrate with other applications?**
Extensibility is standard when it comes to the cloud. APIs and Web services provide a pre-built framework for cloud systems to integrate, so your company can use the best applications for each functional area of the business. That means no more costly custom programming and maintenance from expensive IT resources.

4. **Do my managers want or need self-service access to their relevant KPIs?**
Real-time visibility is a hallmark of today's cloud systems. You can provide access to traditional finance department users and other stakeholders across the business. For instance, many construction firms that are adopting cloud financials provide real-time dashboards for their project managers, so everyone can see the key performance indicators that apply to their projects. Others provide access to a broader range of employees so they can view dashboards, enter and approve expenses, and create purchase orders. Some also give 3rd party access, such as lenders, auditors, CPAs, and subcontractors allowing real-time key information to build trusted relationships.

5. **Does my organization struggle with inefficient processes?**
The cloud can help you gain company-wide operational efficiencies. You can streamline classic finance processes—such as consolidations and closes. But you can also leverage it to tie in other company functions and processes, as well as your clients and suppliers. For example, you can coordinate purchasing workflows that involve all stakeholders. You can deliver a 360-degree order-to-cash process that connects finance and field teams. And you can create budget dashboards for project managers and help increase operational alignment. The cloud enables companies to sidestep the pitfalls of "management by spreadsheet" and avoid the limitations of single-user systems like QuickBooks® that trap information in desktop silos.

6. **Do we need to compete with bigger businesses— on a smaller budget?**
A cloud-based financial system lets you tap into a world-class infrastructure. Your vendor amortizes costs over thousands of customers, so they can maintain world-class infrastructure and provide you with 24x365 operations, continuous backups, disaster recovery, and superior security. This offers you a far higher level of performance, reliability, and security than you may be able to afford on your own.

   Plus, cloud applications can be provisioned immediately and are upwardly and downwardly scalable. So you can get started quickly and change on a dime.

Evaluating solutions

Selecting a solution: it's still about best practices

When it's time to evaluate vendors for your financial system, it's essential to remember that you are ultimately choosing a sophisticated software application. Even with cloud computing implementations, the basic process of vetting vendors remains unchanged.

Consult the basic evaluation checklist below—then be sure to continue to the next section for additional questions you should ask cloud vendors.

Gather requirements. Carefully define and document your needs. Get input and gain consensus from key users in related departments across the organization. Do you need to integrate with project management systems or other applications? Talk to your field teams.

Identify top priorities and challenges. Determine which functionality and requirements are "musts" and rank them so that you can select the system which best fits your finance team's unique needs.

Create an RFP. With requirements established, now's the time to list your needs, expectations, and parameters on a Request for Proposal (RFP) form that you can send to a shortlist of vendors. Using the same form for all vendors will allow you to make an apples-to-apples comparison of solutions.

Research your options. Go online to develop a shortlist, sift through competing offerings, and comb through independent research and reviews. You can consult social networks like LinkedIn and Twitter to connect with people that are already using the products you are evaluating.

For real-world reviews by actual users, check out Gartner Peer Insights, G2, and TrustRadius

Demo or trial from shortlist. There's no substitute for careful evaluation of the user experience. But be sure to see how things work at the administrative level as well.

Focus on product fit. Don't overlook the basic truth: Regardless of the deployment model, there's still no substitute for functional excellence. You need a financial system that offers comprehensive, up-to-date features that modern construction firms require. For instance, many companies find that multiple entity consolidation and project-based accounting are as essential as real-time reporting, process customization, automated approvals, and integration with other software products.

Check references, score, and select. Be sure you carefully screen vendor references. Make certain that vendors provide access to happy and successful customers, but don't overlook online forums where you can access unscreened, unfiltered feedback about vendor performance.

Regardless of the deployment model, there's still no substitute for functional excellence.

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Vetting cloud vendors

What to look for in a cloud software provider

When you move finance to the cloud, your vendor— not your IT department—will operate the financial system for you. This fundamental difference should have a major impact on your evaluation process. It's not like the old days when you licensed software from the vendor and then were on your own. In the cloud computing world, the vendor must form a long-term partnership with you and continue to earn your business every month.

7 Attributes to look for in a cloud vendor

1. **Implementation success.** The ideal cloud financial solution is designed from the ground up as a cloud application and is backed by a vendor and partners with extensive experience. Make sure your vendor can point to a proven track record of successful implementations.

2. **Operational track record.** Your chosen vendor isn't merely developing and licensing software. They're managing the financial systems that run your business—which makes the partnership strategic for you. Find out how your vendor conducts business. What's the cultural fit with your company? What standards do they pursue? Where are the applications physically being run?

3. **Data ownership.** Ensure that it is unambiguous that you own your data and understand the process to obtain your data when necessary. You'll also want an agreement for appropriate assistance in migrating away from the vendor should you ever decide to leave.

4. **Infrastructure and security.** Most cloud computing vendors partner with elite data center providers that provide the backbone to their offerings. Find out who those partners are. Where are the data centers located? What are the business-continuity contingencies? What security standards have they adopted? Can they deliver guaranteed and appropriate levels of uptime? How do they prevent, detect, and remediate physical and network security breaches? Thoroughly evaluate each vendor's network operations center and technology infrastructure.

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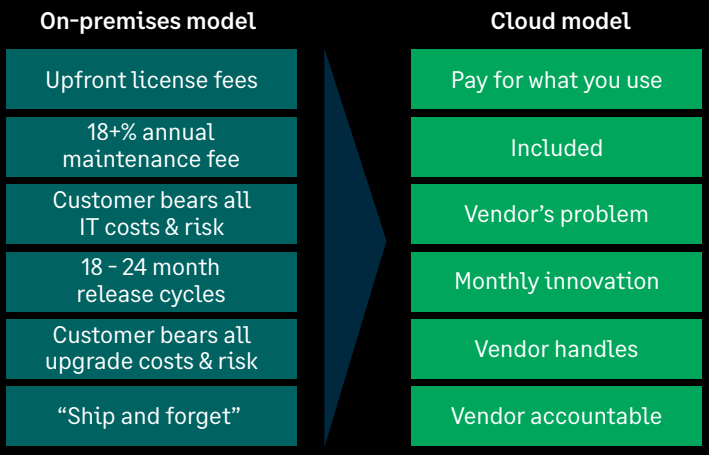
Ensure your vendor can do a better job at running your system than you can—and that it will keep up the good work, month after month.

5. **Return on investment.** Although the financial models can vary significantly, the total cost of ownership (TCO) is typically far lower for cloud computing systems than it is for on-premises and hosted systems. Take the time to carefully structure proper ROI scenarios and timelines to determine the investments and payback periods. Up front, you'll have training and configuration costs, but the only ongoing cost after implementation should be the software subscription, training, and configuration. If you are comparing cloud to on-premises, remember that software licensing for an on-premises solution makes up a very small percentage of its total cost. Additional ongoing costs may include customization, hardware, IT personnel, maintenance, training, customizations, and network maintenance. These costs result in a far more difficult investment hurdle. What's more, cloud computing costs are taken entirely from operating expenses, whereas on-premises deployments typically include even larger operating expenses plus significant capital expenditures investments. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1 — Cloud computing turns capital expenses into operating expenses



6. **Support agreement.** It's critical that you understand what level of support is included with your subscription. Some support agreements will offer several levels of additional support beyond the level included with the subscription. If you need to have access to U.S. based experts, find out where your vendor's support team is located. It's also a good idea to inquire about the people on your support team. Will there be accounting experts and seasoned representatives available to you if needed?

7. **Service level agreements.** Given the stakes, a world-class SLA is a non-negotiable requirement when dealing with a cloud computing vendor. With cloud computing, you rely more heavily on your vendor for support. You can't simply walk down the hall to ask your IT department for assistance if you encounter a system problem. Make sure your vendor has the appropriate infrastructure to offer the best expertise and responsiveness, and be sure to get an ironclad, comprehensive SLA. As the basis of your relationship, this document can be enforced for many years and is essential to setting expectations and insulating your organization from risks. Look for SLA transparency from vendors who are unafraid to publish 12-month histories and current system status on their public websites. If a vendor does not have a public system-status website, it should be a major red flag that they may not have a complete handle on their operations.

7 SLA must-haves

1. System availability. Look for a vendor that can commit to 99% availability or higher.

2. Disaster recovery. If there's a data center disaster, make sure that you'll be back up in 24 hours, and that you'll lose no more than 4 hours of data.

3. Data integrity and ownership. If you decide to leave your cloud vendor in the future, you should be able to get your data out of the vendor's system— period.

4. Support response. As a general rule, your vendor should be transparent about what constitutes a high-priority, medium priority, and lower priority issue—and should be able to respond to high priority requests within one to two hours.

5. Escalation procedures. If you have a support case that you feel needs to be escalated, be provided with a clear escalation path, and the contact information of at least three people to contact.

6. Maintenance communication. Your vendor should let you know when regular recurring maintenance activities take place and should post a special notification if any maintenance activity is expected to take longer than normal.

7. Product communication. Your vendor should commit to providing regular updates on new product features and product release notes.

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Vetting cloud vendors

You are in the power seat

With so many alternatives for financial applications, financial leaders must ensure they understand the implications of all options: on-premises, hosted, and cloud. Ultimately, cloud computing is about capitalizing on a new software delivery model that accelerates payback of a larger ROI and better aligns the financial organization with the new dynamics of growing businesses.

You've discovered why older "legacy" systems make it difficult to get good financial information, what to expect from a modern cloud-based solution, and how to make sure you choose the right solution for your construction firm. In today's market for accounting applications, the buyer has the power. No matter what solution you choose, you should expect faster financial closes, easier regulatory compliance, less manual work, real-time visibility and reporting, and an outstanding service level agreement. Good luck on your buying journey.

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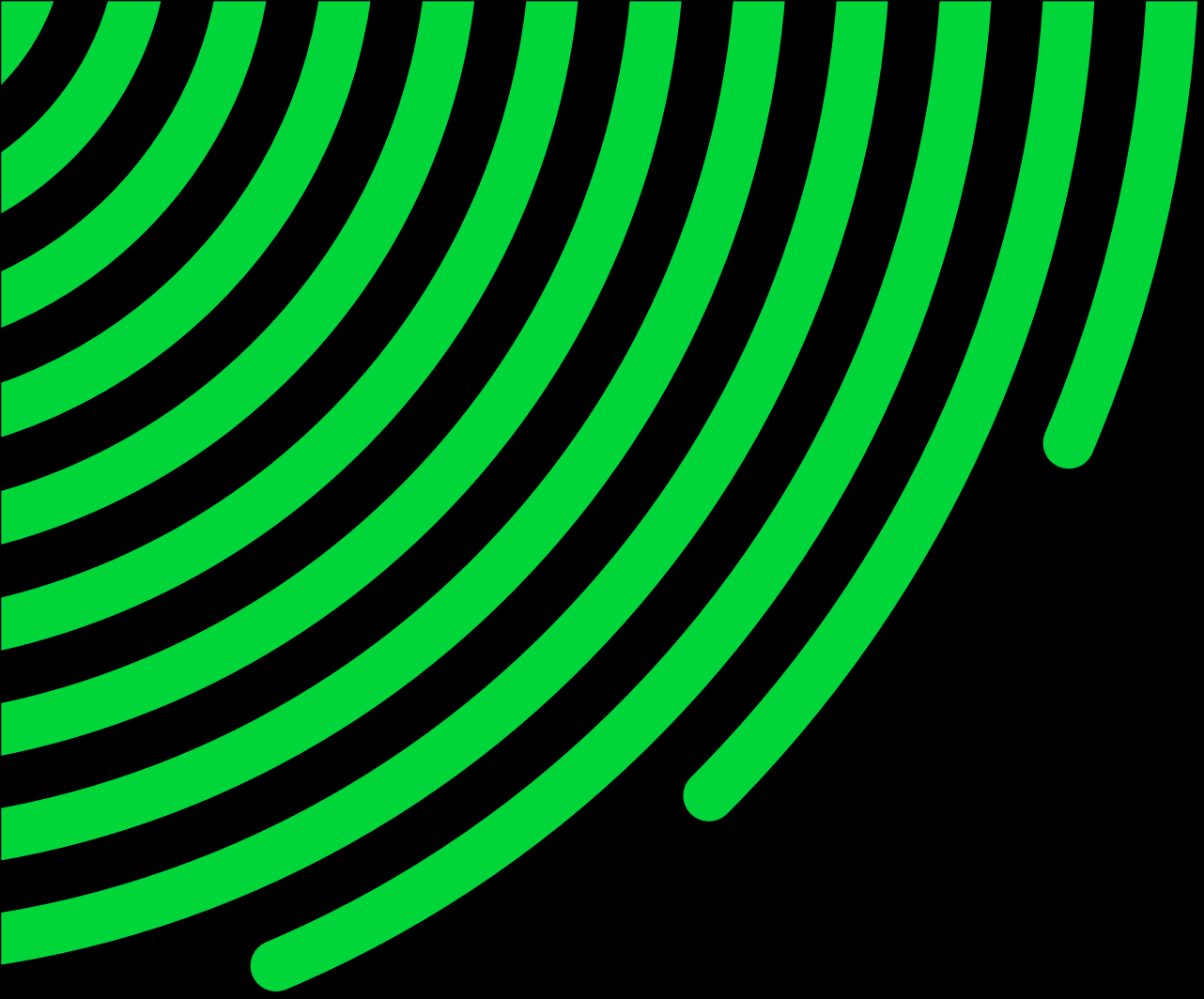

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