

Cloud from the coalface searching for the Holy Grail

Darren Woollard discusses the key elements of finding your Cloud Holy Grail



Reading vendor press releases, attending global conferences and reading industry blogs, I'm sure you're confused by the myriad of Cloud computing definitions. But you'd be correct in thinking that Cloud computing means something different to everyone. After all, every vendor and venture capitalist start-up is vying for the top spot, but is there such a thing as a top place in a Cloud computing podium race? Is there a utopian route to lift your own data centre workloads into a Cloud infrastructure? Simply put – and breaking the news gently; no – well actually, yes. As strange as this may seem, Cloud computing is really no different to the motor industry and I'll explain why later.

Identify the NEED first

There's been a dramatic shift in the acceptance of IT within businesses over the past ten years and I have personally observed and experienced many tangential swings in this, from my role as an infrastructure design engineer and, in recent years, as a consultant.



Hardware is vastly cheaper and more powerful than ever before, the world has accepted e-commerce, and the majority of consumers embrace the latest and greatest ways to allow technology to enhance their lifestyles. But for people like me facilitating the 'behind the curtain controller' role, what do I see and experience?

"Today's IT departments are under greater pressure to react and quickly adapt to business demands" – this is an all too common phrase, and widely used, which really means that IT and the business aren't communicating with mutually agreed benefits. So before decreeing that a Cloud migration project is the only way to meet business demands, you should establish the need, the envisaged return and how to prepare the business for downtime; simple points that should not be shied away from. Be prepared to challenge the option to remain with your current computing model, it may be that your Service Level Agreements (SLAs), Recovery Point Objectives (RPOs) and Recovery Time Objectives (RTOs) are hindered due to physical constraints but fundamentally the architecture works. In this case investigate hosted data centres. I mentioned 'downtime' and that's something that cannot be avoided when migrating workloads into or between Cloud providers. Virtual machines must be powered off prior to migration – that's how the technology stands today, but the future may deliver us something more powerful.

Engage the stakeholders

Whether you're faced with issues of aging equipment, data centre constraints, merger or acquisition challenges,

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internal capability, or perhaps internal pressure to keep up with trends from the industry, you should remain steadfast. A migration to a Cloud provider isn't easy. It requires an open and honest approach by all parties involved, and if you don't understand your application estate, where do you begin? It's never too late to have an amnesty, but 'finger pointing' achieves nothing, and only highlights errors in a process, which I've seen lead to secret deployments of applications and databases. Engage your architects and support teams and accept your IT for what it is, identify a way to deal with it, document and move on. Map out the known formal connectivity of your services regardless of platform. Then challenge the stakeholders within the application of their knowledge and dependencies each component has. Yes, there will be repetitive workshops and conversations but the output will vary depending upon the attendees. People and concise documentation will make the migration a success, and technology is only there to facilitate transit methods and service provision.

Throughout the project ask yourself and challenge others: 'What is the point? What will this achieve?' Every contributing individual should know what they're doing and the reasons behind it. Define communication channels to all parties and frequency of the messaging – and stick to it. Having finally delivered the project the initial feedback after your transition shouldn't be: 'That's not quite what we expected.'

It's all about PEOPLE

If you're faced with a need to transition towards a Cloud service to address an organisational change, never underestimate the impact and disruption that departmental and staffing changes will have to an IT transformation project. Group-wide announcements will divert attention and focus away from the project. Every staff member is an important link in

the chain; don't introduce brittle links. Having experienced this first hand during an engagement, I've seen the damage this can do.

Technology aside, has consideration been given to the regulatory aspects of your data and where it resides? Investigate its location and transmission methods; not all countries abide to the same data protection and transmission rules. Remember, the Internet is global and laws are local. Lifting and shifting workloads from your managed environment to an external facility will impact all facets of your IT governance process. Obvious as this may seem, it's often overlooked; technical people are good at overcoming technical hurdles but not always sympathetic to the sensitive sides of a business.

Is there a Holy Grail then?

So you're now probably thinking that this all sounds well and good, but which Cloud provider should I use? That one, yes, that one over there – the one that meets your requirements with an IT provision roadmap that aligns to your business roadmap.

There's little point in shifting everything that makes your business tick into a contractually constrained service because it's cheaper. Cloud computing is delivered in many guises... Do you opt for private or hybrid? Are you after Infrastructure-as-a-Service (IaaS) to provide raw compute, storage and networking leaving you to deploy and manage? Perhaps.

Platform-as-a-Service (PaaS), because you're not interested in the raw aspects of IaaS and just need predefined web and database servers to deploy into? But then there's Software-as-a-Service (SaaS); stepping further away from IaaS where services are predefined, and no environment management or administration is required.

Desktop-as-a-Service (DaaS) is literally pools of pre-configured

desktops awaiting connection and so it goes on. My point? Migrating to a Cloud provider doesn't translate to a lift and drop exercise of your existing estate, and all transformations will be, and are, different.

However, with so many options, you – as the deliverer of the Holy Grail – probably now wonder where do you really start? I recommend engaging with a Cloud provider that can deliver you upfront assessment services or engage with a consultancy that can provide you unbiased, vendor agnostic guidance. This route will certainly enhance your chance of finding the Holy Grail!

Cloud and the motor industry

This is why I believe Cloud computing is like the motor industry. It's a market where multiple companies are selling similar products, but can deliver bespoke editions to meet your defined needs. We've all heard the analogy of why pay Rolls Royce prices when you only need a Mini. Cloud computing is the same; identify your needs first, while continuing to embrace your current IT estate, and engage with experts to help align your business goals with delivery via a Cloud. This process will be a utopian route to defining a Cloud computing strategy that works for you AND your business.

Good luck with your Holy Grail!

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