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A NEW DATA CENTRIC ERA: WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE IT ORGANISATIONS

This article was written by Roger Camrass, director of CIONET UK and a visiting professor of the University of Surrey, and is based on conversations during a virtual event 'A new data centric era – what does this mean for the IT organisation', sponsored by New Signature and Microsoft.

Adjusting to the "new normal"

The recent rush to distributed working has been challenging but not insurmountable to IT organisations. According to attendees, most companies had a rigid 'work in the Office' mindset until COVID broke out in March. IT organisations had prepared broadly well in advance for distributed working by adopting Microsoft 365 and 'Teams' for virtual conferencing despite the lack of wider management enthusiasm. This gave IT a needed credibility lift when the sudden transition to home working was forced upon us all. The transition has done much to change management 'mindsets' and open up new possibilities such as St James Square who now permit video conferencing between client and adviser.

What has been more problematic has been supporting the rush to online channels for all external transactions, especially consumers. For those involved in critical supplies and services such as The London Clinic and William Grant distillers, the rapid rise in demand appeared overwhelming in the first few weeks of COVID. Most grocers have failed their customers miserably by not being able to scale up to meet the surge in online shopping and home deliveries. Front line staffing of virtual call centres as well as supply chain operations were found wanting as transaction levels rose exponentially. The main message post COVID is one of agility and scaling to meet peak demand levels unforeseen prior to the current crisis.

Moving towards digital organization

Two themes appeared throughout discussion that could help align IT organisations more closely with changing business needs:
- Work in the cloud – many quoted examples of how cloud platforms such as AZURE had helped support remote working and virtual call centres (e.g. Microsoft 365), enabled rapid scaling of external links such as websites (Azure), and video links (Teams). Virtually all productivity tools are now cloud based including Adobe, Microsoft, and Google

- Partnering – the case study by Eiffage Kier, a joint venture serving the HS2 construction project illustrated how working with partners such as New Signature and Microsoft could accelerate collaboration across complex eco-systems and supply chains to improve efficiency. Such partnerships are especially valuable in helping to change organisational cultures and mindsets

The main lessons from COVID is that agility is critical to sustain success in an uncertain world. Attendees recognise that to attract and retain scarce digital workers will require greater flexibility around devices (bring your own everything), modern development environments (agile), and work location (office or home). IT will need to respond rapidly to its business customers – internal and external, by being more flexible. Cloud platforms such as Azure will be pre-requisites to achieve such agility. Judging by where delegates sit in their own cloud journeys, this could take many forms:

- Infrastructure renewal – transitioning from 'on premise' to public cloud platforms to enable remote working, rapid scaling of transaction volumes, and mass data storage
- Agile development – providing the tools and compute capacity to undertake rapid application development in weeks rather than months or years. Modern cloud platforms have progressed well beyond compute and storage to offer the latest development tools
- Productivity and back office tools – most of back office processes and related office productivity tools have migrated to the cloud via Software as a Service (SaaS) offerings. Microsoft has been in the vanguard of this trend and profited accordingly
- Data centric structures – with most applications and services now resident in the cloud, the possibility of aggregating data assets together becomes ever more feasible and compelling. Data Lakes rather than Data Warehouses are becoming the norm.

Exploiting the power of data

Everyone agreed that being able to access and interpret data is the key to successful management in a rapidly changing marketplace for both products and services. However, the delegates also recognised that barriers still exist in just how this can be achieved. Some suggestions were made about how to unlock the value of corporate data:

- Start small with proof of concept experiments, then scale-up when applications and systems are proven to work
- Adopt common data standards across legacy and modern applications to 'weed out' the most critical data sets

- Expand data assets to include social media and other external sources to give a more holistic view of customers
- Use data to migrate from a reactive to a proactive state – anticipate what comes next rather than looking through the rear-view mirror (old style Business Intelligence)

The most interesting example of data exploitation came from a retailer who admitted that loyalty schemes give a limited view of consumer preferences. This organisation recognises that consumers exist in multiple states all of which provide insight into future spending patterns. Cognitive learning and data sharing offer possible solutions, especially when combined with open APIs between different data sources (and partners).

Microsoft has broken away from traditional IT players such as IBM and HP by being more flexible in its approach to open souring standards such as Linux. This should be an important example for IT organisations wishing to move ahead of their competitors.

Conclusions and next steps

Current disruptions caused by the onset of COVID-19 have placed pressure both on businesses and their IT organisations. The rapid transition to distributed working combined with changes in customer demand point to flexible IT platforms and organisational structures. Cloud is the key to providing such flexibility for the future, and has strong implications for IT management:
- Choosing a suitable cloud partner – who will be best suited for infrastructure, productivity tools, front office, and development needs?
- Adopting new IT architectures – how to migrate from traditional structures (such as towers) to a multi cloud-based organisation with appropriate IT target operating model (TOM)
- Migrating to a data-centric business – identifying and 'weeding out' the vital data assets that will give your organisation sustainable competitive advantage.

About CIONET

CIONET is the leading community of more than 10,000 digital leaders in 20+ countries across Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Through this global presence CIONET orchestrates peer-to-peer interactions focused on the most important business and technology issues of the day. CIONET members join over a thousand international and regional live and virtual events annually, ranging from roundtables, programs for peer-to-peer exchange of expertise, community networking events, to large international gatherings. Its members testify that CIONET is an impartial and value adding platform that helps them use the wisdom of the (IT) crowd, to acquire expertise, advance their professional development, analyse and solve IT issues, and accelerate beneficial outcomes within their organisation.

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