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INNOVATION SHOULD DRIVE CLOUD MIGRATION

This article was written by Roger Camrass, director of CIONET UK and a visiting professor of the University of Surrey, and is based on the conversations during an event on how innovation should drive cloud migration, sponsored by AWS in September 2020.

In its earliest days, some ten years ago, Cloud was adopted as a convenient way of shifting workloads and on-premises data centres onto a more flexible and cost-effective platform. But in the last few years, especially in 2020, Cloud has taken on a different purpose. For those attending this discussion event the majority recognise that Cloud is key to accelerating innovation by enabling businesses to expand their processes into new areas such as Internet of Things (IoT) and Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Cloud is all about business innovation

Delegates gave numerous examples of how Cloud is helping them to innovate their businesses:

- For a global defence company, Cloud has changed the way that its services can be delivered to customers such as the Ministry of Defence and Rolls Royce engines
- For a company offering psychometric assessments, Cloud has opened new markets for its services across the world
- For a global manufacturer, Cloud has enabled predictive maintenance of remote equipment by connecting to IoT devices
- For a 'magic circle' law firm, Cloud is giving its professionals access to corporate knowledge assets to increase speed and productivity of its client services

In all these cases, Cloud is becoming a rich source of tools that is available to all workers within a large organisation, regardless of location. Combined with cloud-based security techniques such as those offered by Zscaler it is a safe and scalable platform to support innovative ways of running a business.

Unprecedented conditions in 2020 has been a cloud accelerator

Much has been said about the transformational effects of Cloud in recent years, but the unprecedented situation from the outset of 2020 has created the conditions to accelerate its take-up. The main impact of these conditions has been the move to home working. In many cases the use of virtual private networks (VPNs) was insufficient to enable mass migration of office staff to home locations. Instead, most delegates chose to exploit public cloud connections in preference to expanding VPN capacity. For example, a UK based bank, Santander, was able to increase connections from 1,000 home workers to 20,000 in just a few days.

Accompanying the move to distributed working has been the need to exploit modern collaboration and communication tools such as Slack and Zoom. Cloud has enabled the rapid scaling of such tools in a manner that would have been impossible just a decade ago. The sudden move to distributed working has also opened security issues which can now be dealt with effectively using cloud based cyber techniques.

New skills and partnering models are needed

The wholesale move to cloud has required many IT organisations to rethink their core operating models. Many of the delegates had historic outsourcing arrangements in place where the vendor took care of service integration and management processes. The end of such arrangements has meant that IT organisations need to take these responsibilities inhouse, especially where multi-cloud conditions exist (e.g. AWS, AZURE, Google Cloud).

Delegates such as Cambridge Education Group stressed the need to partner with competent organisations to fill some of the skills gaps. In this case, the merger of three separate companies offered the perfect opportunity to re-platform the new group onto public cloud. This move has opened exciting possibilities of adopting micro-services and APIs to modernise applications.

What are the challenges of cloud migration?

Apart from the obvious challenges of creating a new set of internal skills and external partnerships to support a cloud-based IT operating model, delegates mentioned other important factors that need to be addressed:

- Residency of data – law firms especially need to comply with national data regulations that often require local data storage and processing. AWS is developing local 'outposts' to extend such cloud coverage

- Data security – unprecedented conditions in 2020 has seen a rapid rise in cybercrime. Organisations need to consider new approaches to ID and access management of multi-cloud platforms. AWS has a set of partners who can provide cloud-based solutions to this issue.
- Multi-cloud environments – as organisations expand their dependency on external cloud partners, the ability to interwork across different cloud platforms becomes a key architectural issue. Techniques such as open APIs and Kubernetes are helping to achieve such interworking.
- Trust – migrating key assets such as corporate knowledge and client data onto a public cloud requires implicit trust in the operator. In this respect, only a few large companies such as AWS can offer the promise of reliable and secure coverage at a global level

Joining the cloud revolution

According to leading analysists such as Gartner, public cloud is still relatively embryonic despite the recent adoption spurt in 2020 due to home working. However, the delegates gave strong evidence that cloud is expanding into every aspect of their businesses through infrastructure, platform and software-based services. We concluded that some important policies are needed within IT to pave the way for full adoption:

- A new IT operating model that puts cloud at the centre rather than the periphery of its core architecture
- The necessary internal skills and external partnerships to manage cloud services to every worker in a secure and reliable manner
- The tools to track both commercial and operational performance of a multi-cloud service, and the appropriate interfaces to exchange data across platforms.

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