
Cloud Confusion

Where are we up to?

By Tony Lock, June 2010

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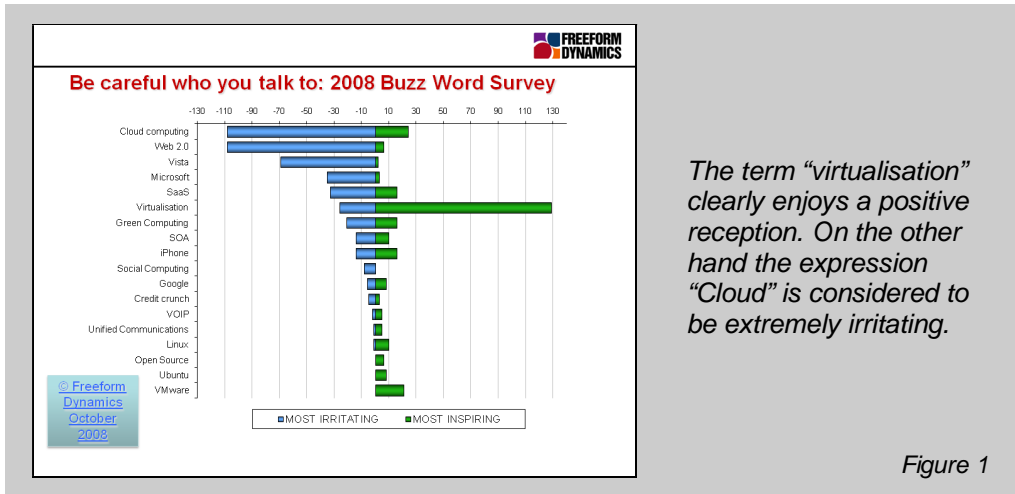
Key points:

In this article we revisit some research conducted in 2008, covering perceptions of Cloud Computing. We then consider how things stand today.

- While there was genuine interest in “Cloud Computing”, it was nowhere near ready to sweep all before it and reinvent IT Service infrastructures
- Bringing things up to date, a wide range of “data security” issues still need to be addressed before many organisations will seek to deploy cloud services as major planks of their business critical systems

Of all the marketing hype storms that periodically sweep through IT, few have ever reached the same level of intensity as that fuelling today all things “Cloud”. But is the outlook bright for Cloud infrastructure services or is the forecast more unsettled than many IT vendors would have you believe?

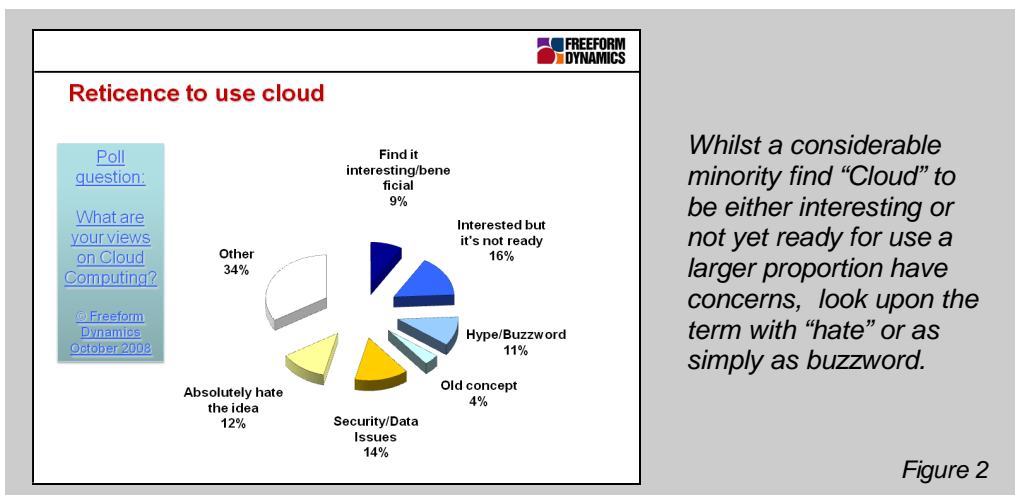
A quick glance at the chart below is enough to throw serious doubts on the claims of some vendors that “Cloud” is on the minds of every one of their customers. When vendors first started to push the term ‘Cloud’ onto the market back in 2008, it was met with a great deal of scepticism, as illustrated by the figure below. If the survey results are to be believed, and they continue to reflect the sentiments of many IT professionals with whom we connect, then as buzz words go, the term “Cloud” is anything but well regarded.



The term “virtualisation” clearly enjoys a positive reception. On the other hand the expression “Cloud” is considered to be extremely irritating.

Figure 1

But the widespread dislike of the term should not, of itself, lead anyone to believe the “Cloud” is not happening. To help clarify just what is going on in this area, over the course of the past two years Freeform Dynamics (www.freeformdynamics.com) has undertaken several studies. We can refer back to the 2008 survey to give an indication of the spectrum of interest around the term, as shown in the Figure 2.



Whilst a considerable minority find “Cloud” to be either interesting or not yet ready for use a larger proportion have concerns, look upon the term with “hate” or as simply as buzzword.

Figure 2

In response to the open question, “What are your views on Cloud Computing” a wide range of opinion was revealed. As can be seen from the above figure, almost one in ten finds the idea of Cloud Computing to be interesting or beneficial. An even higher number, some 16 percent, are interested in Cloud but do not believe it to be ready yet for active usage. In total then, this survey showed that just over a quarter of those answering the survey could be said to have favourable impressions of Cloud.

On the opposite side of the fence could be found the 12 percent who “absolutely hate the idea” of Cloud computing and the 11 percent that considered it to be just “hype” or simply a buzzword. Perhaps of more concern for the advocates of Cloud Computing was the fact that some 14 percent of the IT professionals surveyed had concerns regarding security or other data issues. Clearly these are also matters likely to be of great interest to those responsible for storage and data management.

Some of the comments given by those surveyed threw more light on concerns surrounding Cloud Computing and data security. In essence these could be summarised as concerns about “Trust”, of

both the security and robustness of the approach itself as well as surrounding the suppliers offering Cloud services.

One comment, "Storing normal information on the Cloud is in itself a dangerous prospect, but when you realise the majority of companies process personal data of one sort or another it becomes clear just what a compliance nightmare this really is...", highlights that the security side of Cloud services is another factor that is attracting attention. It is easy to see that even back in 2008 there were some pretty fundamental data protection issues to be addressed, some of which are only just starting to be talked about, never mind tested in the courts. Indeed, some of the comments went further by questioning whether Cloud-based services are legal under data privacy law in some jurisdictions.

There were also questions being raised over the longevity and stability of some of the newer vendors seeking to provide Cloud services as well as of the basic Cloud model itself. For example, the long term cost of any form of Cloud service is always high on the list of perceived inhibitors to Cloud adoption.

Whilst the proponents of Cloud Computing are quick to point to benefits they see over organisations acquiring and running their own infrastructure, end users are not rushing to adopt. Consider the following comments from IT professionals: "Utilising a Cloud service as a core business process is idiotic in the highest degree. It is just plain stupid on so many levels." "I don't trust the Cloud solution - I much prefer to have it all where I can keep my finger on it."

The comments of another end user, again, highlight a lack of trust in Cloud solutions and service providers. "I wouldn't want to be a test case, I'd take the wait-and-watch approach for others to set precedent whilst waiting for my current tin architecture to die by attrition, just for a few more years..."

Clearly "Trust" is important and it appears that many IT pros are reticent about handing the corporate crown jewels, i.e. core information assets, across to a third party for safe keeping, especially when that third party is a US multinational perceived to be open to governmental snooping under the pretence of anti-terrorism legislation. And, as mentioned above, in many states there may also be legislative restrictions on where, geographically, certain data can be stored. And regardless of how robust the providers' security infrastructure appears to be in physical terms, stories of administrator passwords getting out into the wild and exposing private information have a tendency to feed the fears of the sceptics.

Bringing things up to date, we know Cloud Computing continues to be interesting to organisations, but even today interest has still to translate into real world adoption. Data security concerns and issues of cost are matters that are still inhibiting adoption, never mind the challenge of network connectivity requirements if large volumes of data are under consideration for Cloud storage. Vendors need to address these issues as well as the major matter of how they can go about earning the trust of potential users that they will be around for the foreseeable future. This latter issue raises the question of how potential customers can establish the criteria of "data escrow", to guarantee that they will always be able to get their data back whatever happens to their Cloud service provider in the years, or maybe decades, to come.

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