Agonising over cloud versus on-premise?

Maybe it's time to consider the 'third way'

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In a nutshell

Keeping your IT infrastructure in line with evolving application and business needs can be a challenge. Cloud promises to help, but services often come with caveats and constraints. So is there another option for avoiding a complex and expensive modernization exercise? Hybrid IT as a Service, the 'third way', is worth considering.

Counting the cost of meeting evolving IT needs

In some businesses IT is considered an enabler of competitive advantage, while in others it is simply seen as part of the operational infrastructure. Even if it's the latter, business expectations of what IT should deliver, and how, are likely to be growing.

Whether it's you introducing ideas, or users figuring things out for themselves, it would be surprising if demands around mobile technology, sharing and collaboration, remote access and other enhancers of productivity and flexibility weren't on the agenda, or at least on the business wish list.

At the same time, application software vendors are continually knocking on the door tempting users with the latest and greatest functionality. Depending on the nature of your business it could be marketing and sales solutions, customer service management, time recording and billing, right through to full-blown ERP systems. Even traditionally innocuous applications like accounting are moving on in terms of capability. When users and business managers see what's now possible in terms of automation, analytics, integration with MS Office, access via mobile apps, and so on, expectations are raised even further and the wish list gets longer.

The challenges arise when wishes get translated into firm demands, and you start to discuss funding with budget holders. Senior business managers often don't understand the dependencies and that even an apparently simple idea such as "let's just switch on remote access so everyone can get to everything from their iPads" could require an upgrade to your Windows Server environment, network security, and management toolset, let alone the implementation of mobile middleware.

If they do have a number in their head, it's likely to be the one quoted for "budgeting purposes" by the application sales rep who gave them that impressive and inspiring demo. It is unlikely that anything would be factored in for the spend required on hardware, systems software, backup and DR capability, plus all of the integration effort needed to get everything working together properly. And let's not forget the ongoing cost of running whatever you end up putting into place over the lifetime of the new or upgraded system, which may be incurred across multiple applications.

The cloud option can look attractive, but…

Of course one option you have is to throw everything into the cloud, and at first sight this can look very tempting. Based on headline service specs and fees, you might draw the conclusion that going down a hosted route will both deal with your capital budget challenges and provide some welcome relief from that systems administration burden. But the more you explore things, the less cloud looks like the magic solution that many service providers and advocates would have you believe it to be.

For one thing, while you can rent access to raw computing and storage resources pretty cheaply nowadays, with so-called 'Infrastructure as a Service' (IaaS) you're still

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left with a lot to take care of yourself. It's up to you to install and maintain your software stack, including whatever is required to handle security and access, and you also need to figure out what to do about data protection and disaster recovery.

So maybe you now start looking at moving up a notch to so-called 'Platform as a Service' (PaaS) offerings. With this kind of model, the service provider will take care of at least some of the things we just mentioned.

But then you find that you're not as free as you would like to be to set things up as you'd ideally wish. For example, with PaaS you may be constrained with regard to the tools and options made available to you from a management perspective. Fine if you're willing to make the switch and accept what the service provider has put into place (which could be quite proprietary), but problematic if you now have to coordinate policy management processes between the PaaS environment and whatever you're using on site. Furthermore, all of that 'platform goodness' comes at a cost, so it's arguable whether you actually save any money over the long run anyway.

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While many businesses make both IaaS and PaaS services work for them, these are certainly not the answer for all organizations in every requirement scenario. Even if you evaluate the cloud option objectively, you could well end up with an unfavorable or borderline business case.

You then have to consider any general concerns you or your business stakeholders have about your critical and often sensitive business data residing in someone else's datacenter. Such concerns could be based on subjective discomfort or more tangible issues to do with data sovereignty or compliance. Either way, the case for cloud could be weakened, or even totally undermined.

So where does that leave you?

Could the 'third way' be the answer?

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If the kind of experiences, thought processes and dilemmas we have described sound at all familiar, it may be worth considering a relatively new kind of offering, Hybrid IT as a Service, that has emerged onto the market over the past couple of years. Originally pioneered by UK-headquartered start-up Zynstra back in 2012, the model is now proven and can be considered 'mainstream ready'.

The basic idea is to provide you with many of the benefits of cloud, while allowing you to keep the physical IT infrastructure underpinning your systems in your own datacenter or computer room, thus addressing many common concerns. In IT industry parlance, we could put the approach into the category of 'hybrid cloud'. As this is such an overloaded term, however, it's worth taking some time to look at the specifics of both the architecture and the commercial model for Hybrid IT as a Service.

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As intimated, from an architectural perspective, your servers, storage and software platform stack reside on site, along with as much of your data as you choose (all of it, if that's what you want). The difference is that the service provider pre-integrates everything and delivers it as a total platform solution that has been specified, sized and pre-configured according to your requirements. The provider then delivers a remote monitoring, management and maintenance service that takes all of the pain out of keeping the core platform up-to-date, secure and generally in shape from an operational perspective.

So far, it sounds like a combination of a custom appliance-like offering together with a remote managed service, so where does the cloud piece come in?

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Firstly, tools and mechanisms are included in the platform that hook into cloud storage services for backup and DR purposes. And the nice thing about the way this is done is that all data is encrypted before it leaves your network. This means you get the advantages of cheap, convenient, long-term cloud-based secondary storage, but without most of the security and privacy concerns.

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The other cloud-related attribute is the commercial model. Just as with a hosted service, there are no upfront capital costs. The solution is provided under contract on a subscription basis, with fees dependent on the size of the system (server specification, number of server nodes, storage capacity, etc) and the options you choose (open source versus commercial software tools, networking capability, and so on). If you need to increase capacity or add options later, the commercial arrangement allows for this. The objective is to deliver something as close to a cloud-based solution as possible, but without everything having to be hosted.

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Openness and future-proofing

To ensure openness and flexibility, companies like Zynstra assemble their platforms from standard hardware and software components. While there is some proprietary 'glue' in the mix to enable remote management and integration with the cloud storage parts of the solution, your applications will be running on a familiar and open Windows or Linux stack. This also means that higher-level management tasks, e.g. directory management, user provisioning, storage administration, and so on, can be dealt with in the normal way using standard skills, expertise and existing processes.

Apart from removing a lot of administrative hassle and operational risk, one of the biggest benefits of the approach is that it future-proofs your infrastructure.

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As soon as you go down the Hybrid IT as a Service route, you start with a modern and up-to-date platform, which even in its initial form will comfortably support application needs for several years to come from a dependency perspective. For additional peace of mind, however, the provider keeps all major components current through regular incremental updates so nothing ever gets remotely close to obsolescence or end-of-life. Together with a systems architecture and commercial arrangement that allow capacity and throughput to scale gracefully with your business, this means costly and disruptive total migrations largely become a thing of the past.

The bottom line

It can be hard to get yourself onto a firm and future-proof footing from an IT infrastructure perspective, particularly if needs are evolving fast and time, budgets and resources are limited. But as business requirements continue to escalate, you can only extend the life of old systems and minimize upgrade activity so long before complexity and inefficiency come back to bite. While cloud promises a degree of relief, it also often comes with lots of caveats and constraints.

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By bringing together the best of cloud with the best of on-premise IT, Hybrid IT as a Service provides a third option that could well represent a better fit for both your shorter and longer term needs. Your IT environment becomes simpler and easier to manage, while your business benefits from a stronger and more flexible platform for growth and development.

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About Zynstra

Our Vision

We believe that all businesses and organizations, regardless of size, be they on one site or many, should be able to enjoy enterprise class Hybrid IT which is simple to buy, deploy and use, and paid for on an affordable, no Capex, subscription model.

Our Pedigree

Zynstra is a software company, with highly experienced technology entrepreneurs. We have a proven track record of anticipating the crucial developments in information technology that can be leveraged to deliver innovative, game changing business software, and delivering it with partners into some of the most complex and rigorous IT organizations in the world.

We believe that our hybrid IT platform leverages the latest developments in distributed virtualized infrastructure to deliver IT as it should be.

Zynstra is backed by Octopus Investments, one of the UK's leading investors in fast growth companies that can scale explosively to create, transform or dominate an industry

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