

# Cloud's not just about hosting

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Cloud computing is not just about moving your data to the internet. Hosting, virtualisation and storage are all vital components when it comes to something that has become an accepted part of business conversations. But what can companies do to change any misconceptions around the cloud?



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In the purest sense, the cloud gives an organisation the ability to provision hundreds of servers, according to its need, immediately. This 'burstability' gives the cloud the speed and flexibility that companies of all sizes across industries require in a fast-moving and competitive market. In many respects, the cloud is about utility computing that provides users with virtual servers that are accessible over the internet.

But is the relevance of the cloud still the same as when it first came upon the scene what feels like so many years ago?

## Technology strategies

For one, technology challenges are considerably different. Increased legislative requirements mean that governance is intricately linked to any technology implementation. This means that decision makers need to consider technology strategies more carefully before going with the latest and greatest trends as the impact on the business could be significant.

This is especially true when considering a cloud implementation. Many companies think they are working with cloud providers yet the reality is that these are nothing more than hosting providers using updated jargon. Such an environment is one that is hosted by the service provider. In other words, companies will have direct network access to the servers (and services) that have been contracted for. But a true cloud environment provides its users with the ability to scale in real time as their needs change.

Another common misconception exists around virtualisation and cloud. Often these terms are used interchangeably. Yet virtualisation is the software that powers the cloud. This makes it possible to run different platforms and applications on the same server at the same time. Cloud is the packaged service that encapsulates virtualisation.

And then you have the use of private, public, and hybrid cloud solutions that further complicate things. The public cloud is when a company uses a service like Amazon and pays for the resources as they are used. The private cloud is when your business owns or leases the hardware and software that provide the environment. And the hybrid cloud presents a combination of both. So companies could host some of their own elements for mission-critical data and rely on the public cloud for less-intensive needs.

## **Is data safe?**

There are still many concerns when it comes to relying on public cloud service providers for highly sensitive corporate data. The National Security Agency (NSA) is perhaps the best recent example of the risks associated with putting information on the public cloud. Decision makers, and even consumers, are questioning whether their data is safe on public solutions.

Irrespective of the model used, companies and small business owners have to ensure that they understand what it means to have their data (whether mission critical or not) hosted in the cloud. They need to understand the risks and make an informed decision between cost effectiveness and convenience versus the possibility that getting data back from the provider might not be an easy process.

Many cloud providers make importing data into the cloud as easy as possible. However, if a company decides to migrate to a different provider then exporting that same information might not be as straightforward. By making it more difficult to export (even though nobody would admit this), the theory is that the company is likely to stay with its provider. What also needs to be considered is that once the data is exported, what guarantee is there that no information will be left on the servers of the outgoing service provider.

The consumerisation of technology has become one of the biggest challenges when it comes to the cloud. Employees can get their own email, storage, and other solutions at the click of a button. In the past, IT departments might have taken a relatively long time to roll these solutions out to employees. Today, a company has to compete with the likes of Google and Amazon when it comes to its internal IT offerings. As consumers have become more aware of cloud solutions, so they have bypassed the IT departments of their organisations for solutions.

However, the problem of this approach is obvious. Who is signing off on the process and does that person (or department), even understand the impact on corporate security? There needs to be checks and balances in place. If the marketing manager approves his department to run in a collaborative cloud environment without consulting with IT then the implications could be potentially damaging for the organisation. This is akin to the IT department designing and publishing an advertisement in a magazine without going to the marketing department first.

As internet connectivity improves and mobile data costs are coming down, it is an exciting time to be in the cloud space in South Africa. Many organisations are considering at least adopting a hybrid approach to test the waters when it comes to cloud adoption. The key is to make sure that due diligence is done and all the risks are properly assessed.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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