

Head in the clouds

If there's one thing in business I hate more than anything else it's complacency. I often use the saying "If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you always got". For me, part of being successful is about looking over your shoulder to see what's coming: it applies to competitors, to economic trends, and to technologies.

I expect UK business to face more challenges over the next twenty years than in the previous one hundred, and for many companies this will require a change in thinking. As fewer people go into the engineering and manufacturing professions the available skills in the workplace will change and companies will need to match their technologies to suit the available labour force. Building more intelligence to your processes or systems can add cost; however, proper investment is invariably rewarded by increased performance and lower lifetime costs.

The key to new technology is how we adapt to it and how it is adapted for us. We don't need to know how the Internet works, but we do need to know how to work it to the advantage of our businesses.

We are competing in world class markets-if not in our own businesses, then those of our customers' or their customers. We need new thinking and the early adoption of suitable technologies, otherwise how are we to add value to what we do?

Engineers will also need to be more commercial in their thinking. To consider return on investments (ROI) not just in terms simple payback time, but using other metrics such as internal rate of return (IRR) or net present value (NPV). Do we really need to buy that new server or are there alternatives offering a better ROI?

Saying someone had their head in the clouds was once considered a derogatory remark, but cloud computing is an interesting development and relevant when considering the adoption of new technologies. However, whenever I mention it I'm invariably given a wealth of reasons why it's not suitable for us because..... Really, are you sure?

Applied Resources & Solutions

Specialists in B₂B marketing

The term cloud computing relates to the Internet and comes from the way it is often depicted-as a cloud. Specifically, it relates to how services such as infrastructure, applications and business processes can be delivered on demand via the Internet.

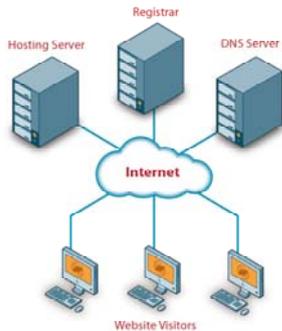


Fig 1. Typical cloud diagram

One example is the provision of software as a service (SaaS) to deliver software applications via a standard web browser. This means that software such as general office desktop applications and associated data are not resident on your PC, but are hosted remotely and accessed over the Internet using a web browser. In this business model you own neither hardware nor software, and pay only when you use it, or by the volume of data stored. It offers huge advantages in terms of cost and control and has already been adopted by many companies.

In addition to your office systems, it can also run your accounting package, building management systems, or ERP, in fact almost anything. Back-up and security is handled by the provider, often with communications secured using Secure Socket Layer (SSL) encryption similar to the method banks use for secure online transactions.

As these services are provided via the Internet they are scalable (both up and down), reliable, easily accessible, and they can complement or replace the user's own IT infrastructure. Importantly, new applications can be trialled, deployed and shared quickly and easily. The benefits include reduced investment, simplified maintenance and optimised plant operation.

External servers, virtual servers, storage and other on-demand services are available to support and back-up existing functions and can often reduce the need for

Applied Resources & Solutions

Specialists in B₂B marketing

new/additional infrastructure investment. Decision making and implementation can also be faster as there is no capital expenditure needed.

Cloud computing offers other opportunities such as providing an external service platform (also referred to as 'platform as a service') on which to build or run/host applications which may be too complex to implement internally. They can also be used to provide new external services to customers, with the benefit of not needing access to internal IT infrastructure from either side.

The idea is not new, but over the last couple of years cloud has started to become more popular both for business and home users. Type "cloud storage" into your search engine and you will find lots of companies on the Internet offering remote storage services. Many of the independent email and Internet Service providers are also offering cloud storage, and with advertised starting prices from £0.11 per GB per month it may be a better solution than buying a new hard drive or raid array. IT decisions are rarely easy and turf-wars often erupt as departments protect their borders. To overcome this, management needs to use joined-up thinking, but first it needs to understand what available. The real enemy should be outside not inside. I believe cloud computing is the right way forward for many situations, but as they say 'there are companies that make things happen and companies that watch things happen, and there are companies that wondered what happened. Which are you?

Opinion piece for Drives & Controls magazine 25 year issue October 2011

For David Folley, Sales & Business Development Manager UK & Eire, HMS Industrial Networks Ltd.