

CLOUD SERVICES FIGHTING THROUGH THE FOG

PCR Whitepaper

About PCR Computers

PCR Computers are accredited partners for Microsoft and Pegasus. We provide Outsourced IT Support Services, integrated financial software, Customer Relationship Management, Document Management and business solutions in London and the South East.



PCR Computers Ltd

T: 020 8681 0000

E: enquiries@pcr-ltd.co.uk

W: www.pcr-ltd.co.uk



Microsoft Partner

A FOREWORD FROM MICROSOFT

You can't look at an IT or tech magazine these days without hearing about the cloud and how it's going to revolutionise IT for fast-growing or small businesses. SME's are now looking to apply services that are based in the cloud to their daily activities to improve productivity, cut costs and enable employees to work more effectively wherever they are.

Cloud services commonly refers to the delivery of computing services over the Internet as an alternative to running hardware and software in your data centre or computer room. You rent or subscribe to computing capability rather than installing and running systems yourself. Everything from raw computing power through to full-blown business applications can be delivered in this way.

Cloud services involves pooling lots of hardware and software together and sharing it out to whoever needs it, on an 'on-demand' basis – similar to the way that electricity is available from the national grid when required and paid for based on actual usage.

Cloud services isn't a revolutionary concept that takes a lot of upheaval to implement. Rather it's a natural evolution of business services and can provide organisations benefits in a number of areas including: improved responsiveness, ability to scale to fluctuations in demand, accelerate development work, reduce your total cost of ownership, cut energy costs and be more secure. Most companies that adopt cloud services are likely to do so alongside their in-house systems, according to what makes the most business sense.

This guide uses real life business scenarios and shows how cloud services could enhance the current procedures in place. It also provides a concise five step plan which Microsoft recommends you follow before taking the plunge with the new technology.



MARTIN WALKER
SOFTWARE SERVICES UK HOSTING LEAD
MICROSOFT UK



INTRODUCTION

You can't flick through an 'IT' or tech magazine these days without hearing about cloud services and how it's going to revolutionise IT for fast-growing or small businesses.

Even though the technology has become more prevalent in the mainstream businesses, it's fair to say that there's still a huge amount of confusion out there, not only about the technology itself, but also about how SMEs can actually apply cloud services to their daily activities to improve productivity, cut costs and enable employees to work more effectively wherever they are.

This guide is designed to look at exactly what cloud services is and how this low cost state-of-the-art technology, previously the exclusive preserve of big businesses, can help your business maximise flexibility and costs. We'll also examine everyday business scenarios and then set out how cloud service technology can help to improve or even transform the way your teams work.

We have also considered the five key questions your business needs to be thinking about once you understand what cloud technology has to offer. This will allow you to see how moving your IT solutions to a cloud or Software as a Service (SaaS) solution can revolutionise your business, reduce costs and improve efficiency.



SO WHAT ARE CLOUD SERVICES?

The term 'cloud computing' was first used publicly by Google at a trade conference. It has since evolved to 'cloud services' and refers to any kind of computing where the needs of users are satisfied by the Internet, rather than a large, in-house server. The cloud is a metaphor for the Internet, where all the software and data is stored.

It can encompass anything from webmail (if you have a Yahoo, Hotmail or MSN account, you're already using the cloud) to a shared, real-time customer management solution being accessed globally by an international business, with all the data held online rather than in a central 'hub'. The defining feature is that there's no additional infrastructure required by a customer except for an Internet connected device, so there's no need to invest thousands in getting your solution up and running.

Another buzzword often heard alongside cloud services is Software-as-a-Service (SaaS). This is a way for users (typically businesses) to gain access to software without having to actually purchase it directly; it's used on a pay-as-you-go basis through a web-based application.

There are a host of cloud services, many of which are driven by the leading IT vendors such as Microsoft. The benefits for businesses are clear – minimal outlay in terms of IT hardware, software and infrastructure, access to market-leading services from technology giants, little or no resource required to manage the service and the flexibility to increase or decrease users as your business needs change.

The arrival of cloud services can be compared to the evolution of the availability and cost of electrical power. In the early days of the commercial use of electric power, each business had to build and owned its own generating plant; requiring material investment and maintenance. Eventually this was replaced with a model whereby large power stations produced and distributed it via a network (e.g. the National Grid) to customers who paid for what they used. This is very similar to the cloud services model where software and hardware is pooled centrally by companies and made available over the Internet on an 'on-demand' basis.

So if the benefits are so appealing, why is there still so much confusion? The fact is, there are such a huge number of different services all promising to transform your business, it's no wonder SMEs feel overwhelmed by the amount of choice in the cloud.

TECHNOLOGY THAT CUTS COSTS

There's a strong desire for businesses to manage costs better and choosing to have your systems managed by a 3rd party provider and connected to your business via cloud technology (referred to as 'hosting' or outsourced IT), rather than choosing to operate it yourself (an 'on-premise' solution) can improve efficiency and cut costs in just a few months. Hosted IT involves a fixed monthly fee paid to a 'hosting' partner who in return provides the computing capacity, backup, security, staffing and secure environment – including paying the utility bills!

Hosting organisations can provide these services at significantly lower cost because your organisation shares the application and IT infrastructure with other users. It also provides for flexibility as businesses change their scale and offers recovery in the event of fire, flood or other disaster.

But the benefits don't stop there. Businesses don't have to think about IT maintenance or ongoing support as this is managed by their hosting partner and your technology will always be up to date, because by choosing a hosted solution, you don't have to worry about upgrading to the latest software versions or compatibility issues. It's about removing the "faff" from IT, allowing businesses to concentrate on using the technology to do their job effectively.

In today's world where cash is king, maintaining a lean balance sheet by funding projects from day to day operating expenses (OpEx) instead of looking for capital investments (CapEx) cannot be ignored.



BUSINESS CHALLENGES - HOW CAN CLOUD SERVICES HELP?

Location

Staying close to customers and colleagues is critical for businesses wanting to cement relationships and grow market share. Not always easy to do when you've got salespeople stretched across a geographical region or working from home.

It's clear that mobile devices have made it easier for businesses to keep in contact with their customers in real time – and is something that most businesses have already implemented at some level or other. But our own research has shown that this is often a fairly basic system – 23% of employees only have access to a webmail-based solution with limited formatting or viewing quality. A further 17% use Microsoft Outlook webmail and 15% have mobile devices when working remotely, but only use these to access their email rather than accessing their business information or systems.

There's been a massive leap forward, but employees are still restricted from accessing other vital customer and company information whilst out of the office. Imagine you're about to walk into a very important client meeting, but you can't remember the details of their last order. If you had mobile access, you wouldn't have to call or email the office and hope they pick up your request in time. With mobile access to your customer management database and email through your mobile device over the cloud, you'd be able to get hold of this information in an instant. The information remains secure, through passwords, encryption and usernames, but the introduction of cloud services means that employees can essentially have all of their desktop applications available to them on one portable device.

Collaboration

When you've got a workforce busy supporting clients across your territory, it's often very difficult to find the time to come together to share ideas, opinions and tasks. Sending a PowerPoint presentation out to a group of colleagues by email is not only a very slow and impractical solution, but also one that's open to a great deal of error, with people working on various versions of the document at the same time.

There are now solutions available which enable people to review, edit and update the same document from wherever they are, using a variety of devices connected to the Internet. This enables all comments to be captured on the same version, but also allows teams to collaborate in 'real-time' even when they are out of the office.

It's easy to see how this could be of benefit to a business – remote workers reviewing and approving material on the road, the ability to amend presentations just before an important pitch or even working with clients in other countries to secure a deal.

Expansion practicalities

Small businesses are often not small businesses for long, and the need to expand can occur rapidly. However, if your existing IT is inflexible and difficult to change, you could find it hampering your plans to increase staff numbers or relocate to new office locations.

Cloud computing technology is a convenient way to solve this problem, as it works on a licence-based arrangement, rather than having to build and expensive in-house infrastructure. This means that it's a very simple procedure to add or remove users from the software – a concept we've termed 'Elastic IT' which allows businesses to define their own solution – which is ideally suited to the current financial climate.

The additional advantage is that most major IT vendors offer cloud services packages, so no matter how big or small your business is, you can still have access to some of the best technology on offer which can help save thousands of pounds a year.



READY TO TAKE THE PLUNGE?

So if you think that cloud services really could work for your business, make sure you've addressed these five considerations:

KNOW WHERE AND HOW CLOUD SERVICES FITS INTO YOUR COMPANY'S EXISTING IT STRUCTURE

Don't just assume that replacing all your in-house solutions with a cloud services alternative will automatically transform the business. It's important to look at exactly where cloud ser can add value – whether for email or improving access to your customer information. An IT partner that specialises in SaaS will work with you to assess how cloud services can best work with your current IT setup.

PREPARE YOUR COMPANY FOR THE CHANGE TO CLOUD SERVICES

As with any technology implementation, educating staff on the impact of cloud services will be critical to its success. Many vendors or resellers also offer technical and user training for staff to ensure they get the best from their experience and that they understand the full potential of the technology.

DO YOUR 'TECH PREP'

Staff access, security both in and out of the office, and integration with existing IT systems and applications requires a "clean," up-to-date identity management system. Ask your IT partner to help advise on the technical preparations to make sure there's no hiccups or access issues.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT APPLICATIONS

There are literally thousands of cloud services applications and many can be customised around your existing business processes. It could be tempting to pick out a whole host of 'nice to have' software programmes, but if they're not going to demonstrate an improvement against existing business processes, then they could simply frustrate your staff. The best approach is to sit down with a cloud partner who will help you work out the right solution for your business.

SELECT THE RIGHT PROVIDER

If you've got limited in-house IT support, it's important to consider how you'll support staff in the long-term. Do you purchase support services directly from your existing supplier or work with a partner who can give you training and technical support on an ongoing basis? Planning this out before you take the plunge will help you ensure the implementation is a success for all your employees.



INTERESTED IN FINDING OUT MORE?

Contact us now to find out how we are helping businesses work in the cloud:

PCR Computers Ltd

T: 020 8681 0000

E: enquiries@pcr-ltd.co.uk

W: www.pcr-ltd.co.uk



PCR Computers Ltd

T: 020 8681 0000

E: enquiries@pcr-ltd.co.uk

W: www.pcr-ltd.co.uk

