



Why You Should Date a Cloud but Never Marry One

Cloud providers love to brand themselves as one-stop shops for their clients' needs. They're not. Here's why it's better to go with multiple cloud vendors.

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Cloud vendors want you, the IT decision maker, to think that they can handle everything in your infrastructure.

It's a familiar pitch to just about anybody who has ever considered outsourcing applications to the cloud: "Just turn everything over to us. We'll take care of it all. No need to do business with anybody else."

Cloud vendors want you, the IT decision maker, to think that they can handle everything in your infrastructure, but the fact is that no single cloud provider can—or should—adequately handle all of a company's cloud implementations. The spiel about turning everything over to one vendor is actually a pathway to disaster. Cloud vendors are just like any other technology providers; they're better off handling pieces of an implementation rather than running the whole thing.

That's not to say that the cloud doesn't have value for your organization. It definitely can. The cost savings, ease of management and simplicity of design that the cloud offers are still big advantages the model offers over on-premises implementations. The key to succeeding with cloud is working with multiple cloud vendors, using each one for its strength and thereby nullifying its weaknesses.

It's also important to be able to walk away from a cloud vendor at any time. Vendor lock-in is as dangerous in the cloud as it always has been with on-premises solutions. No cloud vendor should ever be able to hold your organization or your data for ransom. You have to be in control of your infrastructure, not your cloud provider.

It Doesn't Always Pay to Be Cheap

The main value proposition cloud providers offer is cost cutting. Moving infrastructure into the cloud undoubtedly reduces overhead on capital expenses, such as servers and other equipment, as well as on the cost of having IT workers spend their time babysitting in-house infrastructure.

It's true, too, that by raw cost, the cheapest way to deploy into the cloud is generally to turn everything over to one cloud

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provider. That doesn't mean you should do it. In fact, it's a bad idea, especially in the long run. While turning everything over to a single cloud vendor does cut costs, it also has other repercussions.

First of all, the cloud vendor can become much too entangled in your infrastructure. The primary losses in this situation are flexibility and mobility. Cloud providers can go way beyond simply offering storage and compute capabilities, but that doesn't mean IT should buy into the fully outsourced model. Your workload ends up being heavily integrated into a system that might not fit your business needs and isn't all that easy to escape.

Cloud providers can dig very deep into your infrastructure in order to make your implementation more difficult to rethink or remove. At that point, the IT organization is stuck, and stuck isn't a good place to be with critical infrastructure. Once you're "married" to a cloud, you risk losing control of your procurement functions, and you lose flexibility to make changes in the infrastructure. Plus, all kinds of new risks and unfamiliar nuances emerge; IT now has to protect against those, which cuts into the cost benefit. You need an exit plan from your cloud provider just as you would from any other technology vendor.

Yes, it's more expensive to work with a net in the cloud than to work without one and turn everything over to one vendor. But it's worth it to have the flexibility to retain control of your own infrastructure by being able to move away from a particular cloud vendor at any time or even out of the cloud altogether. No platform is perfect, and no cloud provider offers a perfect platform. Turning everything over all at once and giving a single outsourced entity control of IT infrastructure is too risky to justify whatever costs that model might save. Cutting costs is great. Giving up control of IT infrastructure in an effort to maximize cost cutting is misguided.

Many organizations actually end up outgrowing the cloud. At some point, it might make sense for you to bring part or all of

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your IT operations back on-premises. Again, that will be unnecessarily difficult to do if you've given a cloud provider too much power and too deep a reach into your infrastructure. The cloud isn't necessarily a permanent solution to IT issues. It is, in fact, generally temporary.

Remember, too, that all cloud providers are different and offer varying solutions. There is a difference in moving from one vendor to another, and a move might sometimes be necessary. Organizations have different needs, and their needs change over time. You spent a lot of time building flexibility into your IT environment in order to meet business needs on the fly. Your cloud strategy needs to be flexible, too.

Play the Field

No relationship is perfect. IT professionals and technology vendors both understand that disagreements happen and that even breakups happen sometimes. The cloud is no different. There's nothing magical about a particular cloud provider that makes it a perfect partner for an organization. In fact, the contrary is true; it's highly unlikely that a single vendor can provide everything an organization needs in the cloud.

You need to approach cloud vendors with the same distance and sense of caution you use with other technology providers. Yes, investment is important, but given away the keys to the kingdom completely is short-sighted and dangerous. As is the case with any business transaction, the more control you give to a vendor, the less leverage you have in negotiating prices and service-level agreements. Cloud vendors know whether or not an IT organization can easily break free from a cloud implementation.

While cutting costs is a major advantage of deploying to the cloud, it can eventually have negative ramifications. For one thing, cloud vendors will raise their rates, especially if they know they can. What happens, then, when your boss approaches you and asks you to cut IT costs again? If you're too tied into a single cloud vendor, you can't do it. There is nowhere for costs to go but up.

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Working with several different vendors, on the other hand, greatly increases bargaining leverage and builds some flexibility into the cost-cutting scenario. Vendor lock-in in the cloud is just as potentially damaging as it has been with enterprise software for years. Many IT managers have regretted turning their shops over to a single enterprise vendor, but cloud vendors pitch the very same model now. It still doesn't work.

Although few cloud providers would discuss this option, the safest and smartest way to deploy in the cloud is to take a best-of-breed approach, similar to the approach many IT professionals have taken for years when buying on-premises software. Some cloud providers are better at some functions than others.

Outsourcing, say, disaster recovery to a vendor that is strong in that area and supply-chain operations to one strong in that field makes as much sense in the cloud as it does with in-house applications. It's still cheaper and easier to outsource to two or more cloud providers than to try to run everything in-house, but a multi-cloud strategy maintains bargaining leverage and also ensures that you're putting critical parts of your infrastructure in the best possible hands.

Control the Conversation

IT professionals looking to move into the cloud should never forget that they are the customers and that they should control the relationship with a cloud vendor. In offering comprehensive service, some cloud providers, intentionally or otherwise, and trying to wrest control of your infrastructure from you. They need to work for you, not the other way around.

In choosing cloud vendors for various functions, there are a few important points to remember:

Know what you need going in. Evaluate your own IT operation and determine what it is you need to outsource and what makes more sense to keep in-house. Don't outsource things that are better left on-premises.

It's important to let prospective vendors know up front that you're going to want a relatively easy getaway if you need to leave for another vendor.

Become an expert ... on cloud vendors. One of the main value propositions behind the cloud is that you don't have to become an expert in the technologies you'll be outsourcing. However, you do need to be up to speed on which vendors offer better services in certain areas, which vendors have positive reputations and which vendors can build the most flexibility into their service-level agreements and monthly fees.

Build in an escape clause. It's important to let prospective vendors know up front that you're going to want a relatively easy getaway if you need to leave for another vendor. It should be a critical element in any contract you enter into with a cloud vendor. Also consider defining up front exactly which parts of the infrastructure the vendor will control or be able to access.

Use the Cloud Wisely

There is no question that cloud computing offers myriad benefits to organizations of all types and sizes. Security in the cloud is strong enough now that, if you pick the right vendor, you shouldn't have to worry any more about data breaches and compliance concerns than you would in a standard IT environment.

But the oft-hyped notion turning everything over to once cloud vendor is the best way to deploy in the cloud is misguided and short-sighted. Organizations need to use the same caution in the cloud as they do with vendors of in-house enterprise software. Don't be afraid to use multiple cloud vendors at the same time—that is, in fact, what you should do. And be ready to get out of a contract with a vendor if necessary without causing chaos in the IT department. Be mobile and be flexible in the cloud, and remember that you ultimately control your IT infrastructure. ■

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