

# COMPUTERWORLD UK

## The cloud at your fingertips

The in the ins and outs of managing cloud based applications.

By Dan Foody, Progress SoftwareShareThis

It's virtually impossible to read an article in the technology sphere these days without hearing a reference to cloud computing. Accessing services and applications in the cloud is rapidly becoming the 'must have' in the world of enterprise software.

### Advert

Following the computer mainframe days of the 60s and 70s and the client-server era of the 80s and 90s, the cloud looks set to become the dominant model for computing over the coming years.

Of course, cloud computing has been around under the guise application service providers (ASP) and latterly SaaS (Software as a Service). However, there are a number of milestones to be reached before the cloud is really ready to handle the harsh environment of business. It's important for CIOs and IT directors to understand what these milestones are and how to manage them if they are to get a true handle on managing services from the cloud.

### Evolution of the cloud

The first milestone addresses how much trust you place in a cloud platform. Today customers of cloud platforms have few if any real guarantees (or even visibility) of the reliability or security of the applications that run on cloud platforms. For many, while the basic question; 'Is it up and running?' is easy to answer, the more frequent one; 'Are the customer's business transactions working properly?' is more difficult to answer.

The health of a business depends on key business transactions such as placing an online order, activating a cell phone, or reserving a hotel room. All of these often involve customers or partners and follow a complex set of interactions and

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application software. If a cloud based platform can't automatically determine the workings of such transactions, there will always be an underlying level of mistrust that will resign the cloud to functions that are 'nice to have' but ultimately not critical to the business.

The next evolutionary milestone for cloud computing is platform portability. This is the ability of a customer to move from one cloud platform to either their own infrastructure (e.g. a private cloud) or to another cloud provider. This is a critical aspect of a trusted cloud platform mainly because it means a customer isn't locked into one vendor and in return the vendor continuously has to prove their worth or risked being replaced by a competitor.

### **Taking a deeper look**

One of the beauties of cloud computing is the ability to mash services up. However, the general challenge that people face with cloud mashups is not getting the full picture of what's really going on within the applications. You start to get mismatches in expectations between how you thought you are using this service and how those who built the service expects it to be used.

These mismatches often manifest themselves in very subtle ways. You may feel you've achieved the right result only to discover later that you hadn't actually got what you set out to do. This problem may sometimes only manifest itself when the system is subject to heavy pressure or extreme conditions.

Tools can give people a clear view into what is really going on inside that mashup. You send in a request or a message and get an immediate result but also see everything that went into producing that result. This isn't something that IT departments have had before.

### **More strategy, less fire fighting**

Cloud computing provides a wealth of opportunities for the traditional IT department. The daily grind of fire fighting to keep the infrastructure running is replaced with a more strategic role looking at offering value to the business.

### **Future for the cloud**

Cloud computing offers important capabilities that are impossible within an organization's self-hosted IT infrastructures, such as, the ability to scale up or down on-demand. If a corporate acquisition doubles the number of sales executives that need to access your CRM overnight, you can turn on those users overnight.

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In contrast, where cloud computing becomes much more challenging is in cases where the applications have to be deeply integrated with a variety of in-house systems. The cost and complexity of deep integrations can be a significant barrier. The most successful cloud computing applications are those that successfully match up these two pressures.

There is also a further benefit of cloud computing that is often overlooked. With traditional packaged software, there tends to be very little information about the way the product is actually used. The vendors have to gather information by surveying users (often inaccurate) or by going on-site to visit customers who use the application (expensive and not always practical). Cloud application vendors do not have this problem. They can get very deep insight into exactly how every single one of their customers use their applications in real-time.

Ultimately, we will see cloud applications replacing many, if not most, packaged application products. This will be particularly true where the ability to scale up or down on quickly is critical. Having said that, unless portability and trust can be established, cloud computing will remain a niche for business use.

**Dan Foody, is VP of Actional Products for Progress Software**