TECHNOLOGY FOR BUSINESS

MOVE IT INFRASTRUCTURE TO THE CLOUD? WHAT SMALL BUSINESS SHOULD KNOW

For a small business, moving to the cloud is a no-brainer. You get scale, power, redundancy, reliability, disaster recovery, accountability, professional management, maintenance, and security but, perhaps most importantly, you get freedom from managing business technology yourself -- a perennial headache if there ever was one.

Let's look at the pros and cons of moving your small business IT infrastructure to the cloud. This is called infrastructure as a service (IaaS). But, by default, that means your business applications will also reside there. Some of these applications are mission critical, and they may even be custom to your business so it's very important to look before you leap.

BASIC OPTIONS IN THE CLOUD

For the purpose of this discussion, we're defining cloud as a delivery method that allows applications, infrastructure, platform, and services to be accessed and used remotely via an Internet connection and from any device (provided the apps are formatted correctly). There are a number of ways you can move to the cloud:

- You can rent server rack space at a co-location facility (co-lo) and manage it yourself by putting your own people on-site
- You can rent rack space at a managed co-lo facility (Amazon Web Services, Rackspace and GoGrid are three companies you may have heard of) and have them manage it for you
- You can simply buy all of your applications (provided you have no custom software) from software-as-a-service providers (SaaS) and let them do it all for you

IAAS LEADS OTHER 'AS-A-SERVICE' OFFERINGS

According to a July Info-Tech Research Group report, infrastructure as a service (IaaS) is the fastest growing segment of the "as-a-service" market (software, platform and infrastructure are the big three on offer today). Rackspace and Amazon are leaders when it comes to small business IaaS, but there are a lot of players out there, including many regional operators that you may want to consider as well; especially if you like spending locally to support the businesses that support you.

IAS PROS AND CONS

There's no shortage of both, but at the end of the day the pros do outweigh the cons -- provided you do your homework. Monica Hamilton, director of Global SMB Product and Solutions Marketing at McAfee sent over her list of pros and cons you should consider:

IAAS PROS

- **Cost**: Cloud applications are generally cheaper than standalone applications because they re-use and share resources. No upfront capital investment, no need for highly specialized IT personnel
- **Scalability**: A single server may run out of resources, but cloud systems are designed to scale and can typically handle huge changes in load
- **Reliability**: Multiple redundancy in cloud systems means that they are far more reliable than standalone systems
- **Performance:** Cloud services are constantly monitored and improved for performance that tracks the state of the art
- **Security**: While there are concerns about storing sensitive business data off-site, cloud systems generally have better security than their standalone counterparts (precisely because they have to address market concerns about this issue)
- **Access to better infrastructure**: SMBs take advantage of applications and services created for the large enterprise I.e., Salesforce, SAP, Siebel, Oracle

IAAS CONS

- **Internet access**: Users must have a persistent connection – wired or wireless -- to the Web to access data and applications
- **Data control**: Small business relies upon the cloud provider to secure the data. Data is no longer under the SMB's "lock-and-key." It is difficult to ensure the SMB's data is isolated from competitor's unless they can afford their own server in the cloud. IT no longer has persistent access to monitor user access and data integrity
- **Outages**: Service Level Agreements (SLAs) do not cover the extent of impact an outage could have on a small business. For many small businesses an outage is devastating
- **Mobile management**: Will not relieve the ongoing need for onsite security. As users will continue to use devices (BYOD: laptops⬈, tablets, mobiles) to access the web regularly and they will continue to require device, web and email protection. (McAfee offers a Cloud-managed security.)

These are the basic pros and cons. Depending who you ask you'll find some variation to this list and a lot of that variability will be industry- and regulatory-dependent.

Next we'll look at the various factors you need to consider before handing over your IT infrastructure to a cloud provider. We were going to focus on the "Top 5" for this article but we got so much good information, we decided to include it all. Enjoy.

TOP CONSIDERATIONS FOR MOVING YOUR IT INFRASTRUCTURE TO THE CLOUD

PURE CLOUD PROVIDERS

Does your cloud provider use other third-party providers for THEIR services? It's a good idea to find out, especially if you are going with a regional player. There are cloud providers that rely on data centers they do not own to host their offerings, so check this out and understand what this means.

CONTROL

You will be giving up direct control over your servers and applications. You need to be comfortable with this.

Support

How much IT talent do you want to keep in-house verses how dependent do you want to be on your provider? Once you turn over control to an IaaS provider, you've essentially given them the keys to your business' survival. Choose wisely.

MOTIVE

Understand why you are moving to the cloud, what you expect to gain from it and what you need to achieve those gains.

LICENSING

Do you current software licenses allow you to off-site your versions to a cloud provider's servers? It might be a good idea to find out.

GEOGRAPHY

Where in the world is that co-lo facility? One company Info-Tech recommends for SMBs is based in Johannesburg, South Africa. If having your data on the other side of the world makes you uncomfortable, you may want to look closer to home.