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5 tips for building a successful hybrid cloud

Enterprises may need the flexibility of a hybrid cloud; here's what to think about as you move forward.

By Sharon Gaudin   [FOLLOW]

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Enterprises are increasingly interested in the cloud, but IT managers are discovering that one size does not always fit all.

Well, at least they're finding that one cloud doesn't fit every company.

Sure, some companies can go with the straight-up economy and convenience of a public cloud, while others need the added security and customization of a private cloud.

However, there are the enterprises that are required by their business users to go to the public cloud with non-sensitive data but need a more secure system for their critical systems and information, or because their regulatory environment requires a private cloud.

For them, there's the hybrid cloud.

"Many users want to mix the clear flexibility, agility, speed and cost benefits of public cloud services with the control, security and performance benefits of private networks or the private cloud," said John Dinsdale, an analyst with the Synergy Research Group. "Hybrid cloud services are a good answer for many of them."

While the public cloud is showing a 50% growth rate, the growth rates of both hybrid and private clouds come in at a strong 40% to 45%, according to Dinsdale.

Hybrids are a solid choice for companies looking to fully dive into the cloud or expand their presence in it.

"I believe that hybrid clouds will become the most prevalent cloud usage model for enterprises," said Dan Olds, an analyst with The Gabriel Consulting Group.

"Users will utilize public clouds for short-term needs, but rely on their internal private clouds for the bulk of their computing," Olds said. "This model gives data centers the ability to add extra capacity very quickly to handle seasonal usage spikes or other events, without having to purchase new systems."

Enterprises break up their cloud workloads differently based on their specific needs, including uptime, quality of service and security concerns.

Exactly how they allocate their cloud into public-vs.-private is part of what makes a hybrid more complicated than simply using one or the other. Anyone setting up a hybrid cloud needs to carefully separate mission-critical or strategic systems and information from the rest, set up security and availability policies and consider compliance issues.

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<div align="right">Patrick Moorhead, analyst, Moor Insights & Strategy</div>

"There are complications in running a hybrid cloud versus just a private or public cloud, which makes the planning process so vital," said Patrick Moorhead, an analyst with Moor Insights & Strategy. "Hybrid clouds are very important for the enterprise, primarily because it gives them a choice -- so they need to choose well."

So if enterprises are looking to use a hybrid of public and private cloud set-ups, what's the best way to do it? How can a company try to get the best financial deal and still get the security and scalability it needs?

According to industry analysts, there are some basics that every IT manager should consider. Here are a few of them.

1. Assess your needs

This may sound simple but it isn't. What do you need out of a cloud? Companies should consider, for example, if they could save money, and person-power, by having a service provider manage the servers and software needed to operate anything from email to HR software or marketing and ordering applications.

Another thing to consider is how much moving applications and data storage to the cloud could free up what is most likely an overworked IT department. Some analysts contend that by offloading some of IT's heavy lifting to the cloud -- including fixing crashed systems, helping users who bring their own devices to work and dealing with an expanding security perimeter -- enterprises can let someone else worry about at least part of the regular maintenance routine.

That, in turn, means IT workers will have more time to be innovative in terms of how they help the business succeed.

Do you want to build your own or do you want to lease private-cloud space on a third-party service from Microsoft, Amazon or other providers?

Companies can host and manage their own private cloud or they can hire a provider, such as

IBM or Rackspace, which will create and manage a single-tenant cloud environment for them.

Another question here: Do you have specialists who can handle this or should you get outside assistance from cloud consultants and other specialists? Generally speaking, the smaller a company, the more outside help it probably needs when moving to the cloud.

"These are just some of the qualifying questions you have to ask and answer before you even get started," said Jeff Kagan, an independent analyst. "I would say the best place to start is with a private cloud hosted by a cloud service provider with non-sensitive information. Then as you get more comfortable, you can expand."

He noted that from there, companies can expand into the public cloud or they can build their own in-house private cloud.

2. Categorize your apps, data

The end result of having a hybrid system is it separates the company's information and applications into categories based on where they need to sit in the cloud. So a critical step is to take an honest look at what you're considering to move into the cloud and figure out how sensitive it is or how strategic it is to the core business.

What needs to stay where it is? What kind of mix of public and private cloud do you need?

"Anytime you open up your private system to the public, security is at a higher risk," said Kagan. "But just because there's more security risk is not a reason companies will stay away from the public cloud. They just have to be much more careful."

Companies, especially medium and small-sized companies, can often find tighter security practices in a hosted cloud service than they could manage on their own. They just need to be vigilant in making sure they're asking for as much security, or more, than what they already have or what they think they will need going forward.

"Those are the big questions when considering a hybrid solution," said Olds. Let's say you have an online store that runs fine on your existing systems most of the year, but needs more capacity in December, for the holidays.

"A hybrid cloud sounds like the perfect solution," but there are numerous approaches you could take, Olds said. These include putting instances of your store on a public cloud along with keeping the instances you have on your internal systems? Alternatively, you could just keep your catalog on the public cloud and keep all ordering and account applications on systems in your own data center, he explained.

Rob Enderle, an analyst with the Enderle Group, noted that companies should depend on policies for what applications or data should be in a private or public cloud. If these policies don't yet exist, Enderle said, companies should develop them before launching into the

cloud.

3. Talk to other customers

Nearly every analyst recommended that IT administrators meet with other companies that are of similar size and have similar needs and find out what they have already learned from their own cloud experiences.

Ask about pricing. Ask about the features they are getting and which ones they *wish* they were getting. Ask about any security and reliability issues. What is working for them and what isn't?

"You want to learn from other's experiences as much as possible rather than from your own mistakes," said Enderle.

Kagan added that while the cloud sounds simple, it's actually complicated and land-mined with critical issues like security and reliability, which could make or break a business.

"If you know other companies that use a cloud provider and can get recommendations, that's always a good place to start," he said.

4. Choose vendors carefully

To find the right vendor -- one that has a lot of experience and successes under its belt with businesses similar to your own -- companies need to ask a lot of questions.

Ask for their statistics. How many companies have they worked with? How many large enterprises, versus medium and small companies, have they worked with? Ask to speak to some of their customers who run similar-sized businesses, or ones in your vertical area.

Ask for their stats on reliability (uptime, availability) and security.

"There are a large variety of cloud companies, large and small, that focus on different areas," said Kagan. "Decide what you will eventually need, then make sure the company you choose can handle it all." Also consider using more than one provider because it lets you compare in a real-world situation. Then as time passes, "you can migrate more to the one that you like the best," Kagan said.

5. Move in increments

Companies shouldn't feel compelled to jump in with both feet. Move slowly. Learn from your own experience.

"I would always recommend starting with a smaller and private cloud to get your feet wet,"

said Kagan. "Learn what you need to know in this new area before you expand. That will take some time, but it's much better to step into the shallow end and then jump into the deep end."

He also recommended that companies lean on their service providers to help guide them through the process -- not only in setting up the cloud but in training their own people to use it.

Sharon Gaudin — *Reporter*

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