

Easy to Start, Easy to Stop

Using 'software as a service' in the cloud not only generates cash savings but means projects are amazingly fast to trial, start... and stop. Dan Jellinek reports from the ITU Live panel.



Tonino Ciuffini, CIO, Warwickshire CC

Andrew Tout, Consultant, Adobe UK

Helen Olsen, Managing Editor, UKAuthoriTy

Chris Chant, G-Cloud Programme Director, Cabinet Office

It's not surprising that cash savings are the current focus of attention when public servants discuss cloud computing.

Tonino Ciuffini, chief information officer at Warwickshire County Council, said that his council's decision to use Google cloud solutions for email would save it more than a quarter of a million pounds a year. "That's coming from savings from licences, savings in storage, savings in the security models we use, and we'll also see savings on things like videoconferencing."

Chris Chant, executive director at the Cabinet Office and G-Cloud programme director, said that savings can accrue from all stages in a project's lifecycle. "The business of lock-in and understanding how you get out is critical. The analogy I use is around nuclear power stations – they looked really cheap up until the point where someone said we need to shut one down. The same applies to IT: backing out of services can be really expensive from a technology point of view, a contractual point of view and a business integration point of view."

At the beginning of a project, speed of movement is a key benefit, Chant said. When a development team put together Alpha.gov, a prototype central government services portal, it was up and running in a matter of hours and completed in a few months. "I've worked in places where it would take that long to get a server commissioned."

Then, of course, there is the flexibility of working that cloud computing offers. "It gives our staff the chance to access their information from a range of devices and from a range of locations," said Ciuffini. "We're looking to make sure our staff are out nearer the customers." Information held in the cloud also becomes easier to share with partners, making it easier to explore potential areas for collaboration, he said.

From the supplier's perspective, cloud services have their advantages too, though adapting to new licensing models will be a challenge, said Andrew Tout, consultant at Adobe UK.

"It's actually quite an advantage for a supplier to get predictable money coming in over a year rather than chunks of money coming in every now and then.

"It's something that is very much evolving. What's good is that there is a competitive market for government and if there are a number of suppliers that helps innovation and drives things forward. So it is a challenge, but if you have enough suppliers going after a big enough market, it will sort itself out."

Another potential challenge often linked to moving public services onto the cloud is data security, though the basic challenges here are not new, said Ciuffini.

"The questions you have to ask are exactly the same... 'Where is your data? How do you know it's secure? And how do you know if you can recover from any loss of that data?'"

Overall, it's hard to believe that the security offered by large cloud suppliers like Google, Microsoft, and IBM will be weaker than that protecting servers run by a rural council with four IT staff, he said. However, not all data would be put into public cloud services until the security models could be properly examined.

"Initially we're going to be putting our non-sensitive information in the cloud. Our view is that we'd have to reveal 95% of the emails that fly around in Warwickshire anyway if there was a Freedom of Information request. Whereas some of the more secure information around social care we won't look to put into the cloud until we've looked at new models."

The government's G-Cloud project will not actually create a single private secure cloud for public bodies to use, but rather a framework of standards and accreditation, said Chant. "Organisations will be able to see what products are there and then go along and speak to those organisations and see which ones meet their needs. But they'll be pre-procured, so we're hoping that this starts to take a lot of the effort out of procurement, security and service management."

Ultimately however, it will not matter much if it's only IT people who see the benefits of cloud computing if it all sounds like technobabble to other senior decision-makers. The key, said Ciuffini, is to talk less about cloud and more about business benefits.

"I was talking with a senior manager when we were embarking on this, saying how exciting it was, and she said 'it might be exciting for you, but it doesn't mean anything to us non-IT people'. That was a real wake-up call. So we no longer talk about email and cloud, we talk about new ways of working."

Another clincher for the people in charge is bound to be the cost argument; not just savings over time but the ability to try out those new ways of working much more easily than has been possible in the past, Chant said.

"It wasn't so long ago I remember people talking about £10 million committed up-front to get a collaboration system in place for an organisation. Whereas now you can just pull out a collaboration from the cloud for 50 people or 100 people to work on for a while, and then say either 'that was great, we want more of that', or 'you know what, it's just not going to work for us'."

In the end, it does come back to savings, but the speed and size of those savings will depend on an organisation's current situation and IT commitments, Chant said.

"We've only scratched the surface around the savings, but the thing that will determine the amount of savings we make and the scale of those savings will be the speed of take-up," he said. Talking about the Government Digital Service systems, he added, "We needed to start a new organisation - it was very quick and easy. But for someone who is already in a five to ten year contract for all their services it's going to be a different calculation."

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