

Migrating to the cloud can still be a gamble. How can you be sure it pays off?

A long-term partner can help you shorten the odds

While nothing in life is risk free, moving your organisation to the cloud should be one of your more straightforward decisions, shouldn't it? So why are so many companies mired in cloud strategies that simply don't deliver, or are at significant risk of failing? And who can they turn to for help?

These are the inevitable questions thrown up by [recent research by Forrester Consulting](#), commissioned by VMware and UK next-gen managed service provider Xtravirt, which showed that organisations are still struggling with migrating to the cloud – and continue to struggle when they get there.

The research shows today's application strategies are "hybrid by default," with 51 per cent of organisations having already adopted a multicloud strategy and 85 per cent running business applications on two clouds or more.

But virtually every organisation had experienced problems with their initial cloud adoption, with nearly half confessing that they struggled to keep costs under control. Almost as many cited problems around data protection, while a third experienced problems with security and compliance.

But these problems don't go away once companies are up and running. In fact some, like a "lack of skilled employees to manage cloud platforms" become more pronounced as companies continue with their cloud journey.

So what are the warning signs that your cloud transformation might not be delivering the value you were hoping for?

Xtravirt's Strategic Services Director Robin Gardner cites three key indicators. First, since its inception, the cloud has often been seen as a way to evade traditional demand and capacity management, often resulting in a perceived "freedom to procure". The unintended consequence is that costs could run out of control. In addition, the overall environment may become harder to manage.

Secondly, because companies often neither have a plan or the skills to exploit the possibilities of cloud on an ongoing basis, they fail to realise the value from their investment that they anticipate. The ability to unlock new capabilities and value will be lost without an ongoing commitment to invest in acquiring new cloud management and operational skills.

The third element, according to Gardner, is a decreasing return on investment as organisations move beyond initial, easily-defined use cases which can be quickly rebirthed as cloud native services. This is typically because they must grapple with a long tail of heritage workloads that still deliver value for the business, but which do not lend themselves to quick and easy cloud modernisation.

It's no surprise then IT decision makers (ITDMs) are looking for help, with 86 per cent of organisations surveyed by Forrester either already investing in a managed service provider (MSP) or planning to over the next 12 months. And they have some pretty high expectations.

Just over half expect that working with a MSP will bring access to a broader range of apps and services, with the same number expecting improved app or infrastructure performance. And 47 per cent expect such a partnership will deliver higher developer satisfaction – a key issue at a time of fierce competition to recruit developer talent.

The ace up your sleeve?

But what exactly is a managed service provider in this context? Gardner draws a sharp distinction between a “next generation” managed service provider and the traditional outsourcing model.

As Gardner explains, the traditional outsourcer's offer was “give us all your problems, we will try to fix them and reduce your costs in return.” Their ultimate objective was to “take the whole of your IT capability and leave you with a retained IT organisation”. This may have made sense when technologies evolved comparatively slowly and upgrades and rollouts were measured in years.

By contrast, a (good) next generation service provider, looks to provide “a set of services aligned to your internal IT operating model, addressing one or more target business outcomes you're trying to achieve,” Gardner explains. “The focus is on the long-term journey a customer is on, whatever the technology or platform they are investing in.”

That might sound conveniently open ended, but says Gardner, it's simply a recognition that "we can't be successful without understanding the customers' objectives and outcomes, and they can't be successful if the cloud platforms and services, whether private, public or hybrid, don't evolve to meet those objectives."

At its simplest, this means Xtravirt's focus goes beyond "day one" on the cloud, the point at which traditional service providers say "job done," step away and send in their invoice or switch into maintenance mode.

The reality is that "Cloud only takes away a small proportion of the IT operational challenges associated with delivering services." At the same time, with the onset of "new skill requirements, new operational procedures and new maintenance activities, you cease to be in control of areas of your environment that you're used to being in control of."

This requires thinking differently around key issues like business continuity and disaster recovery and resilience. It also means constant vigilance about cloud platform providers' own strategies; products and services can be changed or even deprecated with minimal notice, and customers do not have the option to sit tight until they're ready to migrate.

As we saw earlier, everything can look rosy the first day an organisation flicks the switch on their new cloud platform. But the difficulties often kick in on day one +n, particularly as teams begin to work on bringing heritage workloads to the cloud.

"There is a need to have a strategic decision about where that long tail lies," Gardner says. And the answer may not actually be a cloud native solution, but rather a hybrid or multicloud solution. This is where technologies like VMware Cloud on AWS or the Google VMware Cloud Engine come into their own, he says, with the ability to lift and shift legacy virtualized workloads rather than embark on a refactoring exercise that may ultimately be fruitless. This then gives the CIO time to formulate a more complete, long-term strategy.

This also highlights a key issue when choosing a partner. Picking someone who is, as Gardner puts it, "operating model agnostic," will increase your chances of succeeding in the cloud by enabling you to adopt a "cloud-right" strategy. By using a vendor who solely focuses on migration to native cloud, there is a risk of introducing unnecessary complexity and slowing down your cloud adoption. Hybrid solutions can be ideal for those workloads which are more complex to refactor, or which yield little benefit by being hosted on native cloud.

Xtravirt, for example, is explicitly agnostic. “We are much more focused on ensuring that the customer has the right cloud strategy,” says Gardner. “And having access to the skills to manage, maintain and evolve a private, hybrid or multicloud strategy becomes a core component of the service design.”

You don't need to go all in

If those skills are developed in-house that can result in key person dependencies, which represent another ongoing risk. More broadly, as companies gear up to move from the protective mode they've been in over the pandemic, they face the dilemma of how to assign people to ensure a steady state AND kick off change projects. “And that's sucking up internal resources, business knowledge.”

There is also the “stability paradox” that the cloud's very reliability – most of the time – means tech teams do not develop the muscle memory to deal with particular challenges or crises on a day to day basis. “You're in a great, strong position,” says Gardner. “But when issues occur, it can be like a house of cards. Troubleshooting can be much more complex, and require skills you haven't had an opportunity to develop in-house.”

That's why Xtravirt puts “the target operating model” to the fore in its discussions with customers, “So that actually, there's a plan for long term adoption and support.” And it's this that provides the basis for true digital transformation, over the longer term.

But what about the short term? As we barrel into 2022, what can companies do now to start ensuring their cloud strategy is fit for the future? The first step is to consider your operating model for 2022, what risk, audit and compliance commitments have been set out, and how you will manage and improve operational resilience and key person dependencies.

It's also about being clear about your ability to make progress with ongoing and expected business priorities, creating bandwidth within the internal resources required both during the transformation and after.

Allied with this is the need to look back at the changes over the last year, including any new services. This is particularly important when it comes to services deployed in response to the pandemic, he says, “and whether you have the internal operational capability to manage and maintain them for the long term.”

As Gardner explains, there are many organisations that haven't put a remote access or digital workspace solution in place over the last year or they may have implemented a solution very quickly and outside the normal process of controls and approvals. But "those controls are coming back. And there's a need to ensure that there's assurance and a level of robust management around those capabilities."

Do you have to engage with a partner to achieve all these short and long-term objectives? Of course not. But with Forrester Consulting study finding that cloud adoption and management challenges mean 80 per cent of organisations never achieve their broader digital transformation outcomes, the odds aren't in your favour if you don't.