

Private and public 'clouds' provide IT flexibility and security

There used to be a straight choice between hosting applications oneself or placing them in the 'cloud' for extra flexibility. Today those lines are blurring and so developers need to make applications available where their employer or clients need them, as Sean Hargrave finds out.

▶ **The biggest buzzword in computing that business people are going to increasingly come across throughout the year ahead is undoubtedly 'the cloud'.**

It is a simple premise. Rather than host all of its applications within a headquarters office, many companies are choosing to instead make them available through remote servers which employees can access on a computer or mobile wherever they have internet access.

Consumers are also being offered 'cloud' services such as several well known music streaming sites, web-based email accounts, including Hotmail and Gmail, and photo and video storage sites, such as Flickr.

The extra flexibility has meant many software providers are now being called upon to develop applications which can be deployed in the cloud, where storage is relatively cheap, and where they can be updated by the vendor. This frees business clients from the traditional need to have to employ or contract IT staff to periodically shut down their network and update applications from within the company's own server room.

When this is done remotely and automatically, with the end user always having access to the latest updated version of the software, the model is known as Software as a Service (SaaS). It comes with the bonus of clients generally being charged nothing (or very little) up front, paying instead a monthly fee per user. This typically makes cloud services much cheaper than those hosted by the end user and cloud services are generally far quicker to set up and deploy.

Mixed blessings

For developers at software companies, as well as those working within IT teams at (typically) large companies, these latest developments are both an opportunity and a threat.

On the one hand they are a welcome means of giving the end user extra choice and flexibility as to how they use applications, which are likely to provide better value for money. At the same time, though, the emergence of cloud computing and SaaS is causing both end users and developers to have serious questions, particularly over whether such new services will drive down revenue and if wider access risks security.

According to David Akka, Managing Director of Magic Software UK, Eire & Nordic, such legitimate concerns are holding back both software developers and their clients from fully embracing the cloud. These questions have prompted the company to develop its uniPaaS platform, which can minimise development costs by making the same application work in multiple environments - be it a corporate data centre or the cloud, for example. It also allows 'hybrid' solutions where a company may keep its proverbial 'crown jewels' on its own network but release less sensitive applications over the cloud.

"For software developers there is a very real question about the economics of the cloud and if they are losing a very valuable revenue stream," he says.

"Many companies are still on licence deals and are happy to be paying for software and applications on this more traditional model. The software developers are happy for this as it's a very valuable revenue stream, which they obviously don't want to threaten by switching all their efforts in to developing for the cloud.

"However, at the same time, they can't ignore the cloud. It's a development that has allowed the vast majority of small and medium software development companies to take on the big four and offer new, agile pricing models. So, there's a lot of demand from companies who want to use it to quickly set up applications that their work force can access wherever they are and without the upfront costs you'll typically pay with a licence agreement."

It is for this reason that Akka claims his company has developed the necessary platform to allow software developers and their clients to make applications available on new channels without a time delay while a new programme is written.

In essence, applications can be repurposed for a different channel at a later date without the need to code all over again from scratch.

"The cloud combined with SaaS is proving a great means for the developers to take on the giants of the industry and provide incredible value to business clients," Akka adds.

"As ever, though, it's difficult for developers to second-guess future demand. They don't know when they're writing a new application which channel is going to prove the most popular, so it makes sense to develop a single application and then, through one platform, distribute it to a number of different channels."

Mix and match

This requirement is set to become even more important, Akka suggests, because he believes that although cloud computing is set to be the key trend and buzzword for the year ahead, for many companies the cloud will start to take on a very different look and feel. For companies of all sizes, but particularly among large enterprises, Akka reveals there are moves to embrace the cloud but to do so in a hybrid fashion, as he explains.

"The large enterprises we deal with directly and other companies we've come in to contact with through events are all pretty much reporting the same thing," he explains. "They get the cloud and they want to use it because they realise paying per month for flexible services that are quick to deploy and are managed for them is very attractive. However, nearly every executive will tell you they don't want their mission-sensitive information, such as financial or strategic planning, on the public cloud.



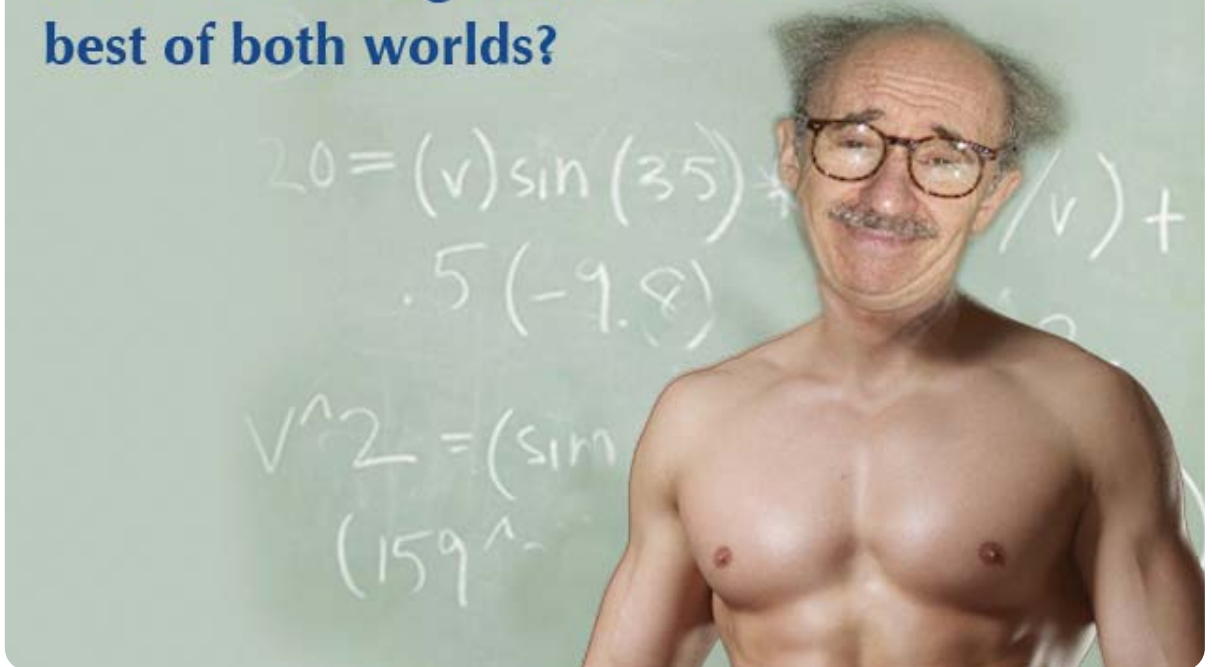
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Wouldn't it be great to be the best of both worlds?



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"That's why we're starting to see a difference between the public and private cloud, it's certainly a big trend the experts at Gartner research are predicting for 2010. The public cloud is the cloud as we know it today, but we're starting to see a private cloud appear which has far better security and can only be accessed by registered users or devices to help protect against eavesdroppers.

"It means applications will in future be placed on a platform, like ours, which allows clients to dictate which information never leaves their company's internal network, which can go on the private cloud and which is ok to be on the public cloud."

Out and about

Moving forward, cloud applications will also need to be accessible on mobile devices. Although cloud services have, to date, been mostly accessed on the move through laptops, mobile phones are now becoming sophisticated enough to access applications and Wi-Fi hotspots and 3G networks are now providing quick access to data on the move.

Hence, software developers and businesses are having to consider how best to roll out their services on to mobile devices.

"Developers know they need to be able to offer applications that work on smartphones but, again, it's the typical scenario of them not knowing what the future brings," he says.

"They don't know how popular it is going to be, who will be insisting on it for their applications so we think, again, it's another reason to use a platform which can take a single application and deliver it across a wide range of channels, including mobile, without developers having to make lots of different versions themselves. We'll certainly be extending our support for Windows Mobile to the iPhone and Blackberry models this year to add more flexibility."

So, the year ahead looks set to see a proliferation of routes companies will seek to use to allow their staff to remain productive inside and outside the office. At the same time, the option of accessing applications through the cloud, whether private or public, or a combination of both, will mean software developers will need to remain agile and able to provide their service wherever their clients require.

For businesses it should be an exciting time as the cloud develops to combine flexibility with improved security. For companies of all sizes the results should be liberating, freeing them from a straight choice between fully controlling applications and having them completely hosted on the cloud.

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Taking the strain out of HR

HR divisions have a huge daily task on their hands to not only master payroll but also manage staff (be it holiday requests, benefit enquiries, training needs and so on) and help recruit, retain and train a work force that will drive growth for the business.

However, legislation is constantly changing and there are many calculations and variables that need to be taken in to account. Hence the HR market is a fertile developing ground for software which takes the administrative strain off an HR team.

Safe Computing has adopted the Software as a Service (SaaS) model to such an extent it even calls its fully-managed package, built on the Magic Software's uniPaaS platform, Elite as a Service (EaaS).

It means that, with no need to do anything itself, an HR department has the latest information available for tasks such as payroll, tax, training administration, absence monitoring, recruitment process management, pensions administration and leaver management, among many other facilities.

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