



## Cloud Angst

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High-Yield Methods

As recently as 18 months ago, despite foaming at the mouth software sellers pushing “cloud,” we could still reasonably say, “No one ever got fired for staying on a client-server platform.” Buyers could persuasively claim “too risky” and “not ready for prime time.” But that was then and just 18 short months later is now. Although I still know no one fired for not buying cloud computing, today, keeping both feet dug into client-server turf will raise questions about which decade you’re living in – and from technology innovators, which century? Now only IT managers in ultra-high speed, ultra high-volume processing environments such as research, global reservation systems and high end financial services get a pass on considering the cloud, and only when choosing legacy transaction systems.

So what’s changed so much in 18 months?

The tip of the tongue answer is, “No one was buying new technology 18 months ago.” But that’s not true. Many software sellers maintained sales reasonably well during the recession – and some thrived. The next most obvious is, “Data security’s much better.” But it isn’t. Cloud security hasn’t improved demonstrably more the client-server security during this time. Then comes, “Because the cloud is now enterprise level.” Whatever that means. Nothing significant has changed in cloud “enterpriseness,” either. Another professed concern is, “Why rush to be first?” Problem was even then if you wait much longer you risk being last – especially if you’re acquiring new systems that project to be in place for five years or more. And of course you can attribute increased acceptance of cloud computing to

software seller sales pressure. However, when push comes to shove vendors are very happy selling you either platform, as long as it's their platform.

The only significant improvement in cloud systems over the past 18 months – better resources for integrating data across disparate applications – is helping encourage cloud use, a bit. However, the corporate world is still wrestling with internal resistance to fully integrating data across functional silos, which turf defenders fear out of concern integration will cost them autonomy and “cover.” Integration keeps getting shot down, making it disappear off the radar screen.

So what caused the rapid change in technology buyer attitudes towards cloud computing, within a very compact time span? In a word, “angst.” Buyers were afraid of cloud computing, mostly from irrational concerns, and they're finally getting over it – tentatively. Many of the lingering fears remain just below the surface, leaving technology buyers between a rock and a hard place. On one hand, they can't conceive of business continuing to put up with horrific client server implementations, huge hits to cash flow, disruption of business for a year or longer implementation and most often failure to achieve desired outcomes. Who wants that? But on the flip side, corporate data are the company jewels. You don't just go messing with them. You don't go putting them “at risk” in the care of a third party. You don't put them at risk of being lost to “catastrophic failure.” And similar fears.

For a critical mass of technology buyers to get fully over their angst, two things must happen:

- 1. Get a grip on the risks of adopting cloud technology compared to the risk of continuing to use traditional systems.** In some respects, risks posed by cloud systems are lower, not higher, than the inherent risks of staying on a traditional client-server platform.
- 2. Stop blaming technology for the high rate of failure among all software implementations.** Technology supports business process, or it should. Companies failing to configure new systems to support their process – and not redesigning process to fully leverage new technology – are the primary reasons for implementation failure, rather than “bad” technology.

First, let's try to dispense with some of the most common irrational fears.

- **What about data security?** Not to be a smart aleck (never ☺), but what about it? None of the major data thefts have involved cloud systems. Cloud computing firms have if anything over-compensated for the perceived security risks.
- **What if your vendor won't return your data?** Unless you owe them lots of money, that's vendor suicide. I only know of one software vendor ever trying to hold up departing customers for huge "exit fees," and now customers are departing like ships leaving a sinking rat.
- **What if the cloud evaporates?** Most cloud computing systems have far more redundancy built in – and much better fail-safe resources – than all but a small minority of corporate client-server systems.
- **What happens if your ISP's servers fail?** They're going to fail much less often than your own servers.
- **What happens if a huge tree falls across your main telecomm lines?** This actually happened to a client while I was meeting with them. Of course, the tree took out the power lines at the same time, leaving the question moot. But those of us with charged batteries and personal wireless hot spots (wireless redundancy is still in the "Mikey" stage) could stay on the cloud while everyone else sat stymied.
- **What happens if a tornado strikes?** With cloud, you can huddle in a safe space with laptop and keep working – while your client-server hardware stack morphs into unguided missiles twirling into the next county.

My only concern specific to adopting cloud technology is data integration. Yes, before adopting cloud computing you should carefully review their hardware redundancy (or the redundancy at their outsourced web server farm), their major fail contingency plans, their data back-up procedures and their historical uptime statistics – but application data integration needs the most attention.

While redesigning process to take advantage of new technology, you need to map out every desired data transfer or data sharing point among systems. But you have to do that with client-server systems as well – unless you want to take the ultimate risk by implementing new cloud or server technology without prior process redesign. And if you're that big a risk-taker, why are you reading this? You have no angst.