The Cloud for SMB:
A Process, Not a Place

By Peter Barnes, VP, ISG, Dell UK/Ireland

I'm often asked how the cloud fits into the IT strategy of a small and midsized business, as the VP for the Infrastructure Solutions Group (ISG) for Dell in the UK and Ireland. As Michael Dell once said, "The cloud isn't a place. It's a way of doing IT." That's an important point for IT organisations in SMB to remember.
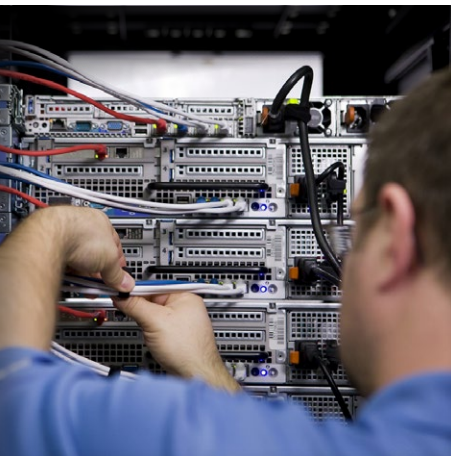
When the word "cloud" is used, people often think of the large public clouds provided by the likes of Amazon, Google, and Microsoft. These cloud offerings have their place and offer many benefits, but there are many legitimate reasons why organisations don't put their workloads in such public clouds. One reason is cost: It's a myth that cloud services are "cheap." Public cloud offerings can look financially attractive at the outset, but the costs can quickly escalate.

In addition, when an organisation moves its workloads to one of the big-name cloud providers, that is often a one-way journey that requires "lock in" to that particular cloud vendor. Again, cloud is a way of doing IT, not a place. If an organisation makes its applications cloud-capable, and does that in such a way that it's not using any of the proprietary hooks that some of the big cloud providers want you to adopt, then in theory you can move between public cloud providers as costs change.

More importantly, you have the ability to bring the workloads back into your own IT infrastructure—and that is the ultimate way to retain your independence and protect yourself from vendor lock-in. All organisations need to retain the ability to choose where they place their workloads. As a result, what we tend to see is people using "cloud-like" technologies to build a cloud experience within their own organisation—where they can retain control and ownership of data placement. Such internal clouds can be far more cost-effective than public clouds.

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On-premises cloud solutions also help address the fact that legacy applications will never completely be retired. They may in part be replaced with more modern and cloud-capable applications, but for the foreseeable future, we will more likely see new extensions to these applications written in cloud-friendly ways.

Regardless of where your cloud is located, applications of the digital era require a fundamental rethink of the underlying infrastructure. In the past 10 years, we have been on a journey of server virtualisation, but the underlying storage and networking has remained physical. Now IT professionals need to embrace the "virtualised-everything" paradigm so as to enable their workloads to be transportable to and from the cloud. This paradigm shift requires an investment in both skills and software that typically go under the banners of software defined, converged, and hyperconverged technologies.

When an existing business has an on-premises IT operation and has some kind of data centre infrastructure either on premises or collocated, then my advice is always to keep at least some part of that infrastructure. Again, it's all about IT choice and avoiding cloud vendor lock-in. It's always good to have options. We don't know how public clouds will evolve, how their features will change, and what they will cost. Having a hybrid model, where you use external clouds but retain at least some element of your own capability, is a way to retain that choice. It can also allow you to cost-optimise your IT infrastructure and keep your essential data local.

My other advice to SMBs is to avoid dealing with multiple IT suppliers and technology partners. Dell is unique in that we design and build products from the desktop to the data centre, including PCs, notebooks, tablets, servers, storage, and networking for every conceivable IT need. And it's all from one vendor, all under one roof. We've seen firsthand how valuable this approach is for our small business customers and for the partners who support them.

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