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Re-architecting Business for the Cloud

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Many people continue to see the cloud as a technology phenomenon, missing the fundamental business shifts that result from its ability to drive deep, connected digitization. But how do we re-architect our pre-digital organizations to thrive in the new digital era?

Technology has undoubtedly transformed our personal lives, with an incredible selection of services, devices and options changing the way we live. Whether it's speaking to friends, shopping, travelling or entertaining ourselves, it often feels as if the way we do everything has changed over the last 10 years. In this environment IT feels personal and supportive – endlessly configurable with the apps and information we need to help us live our lives the way we want.

Understandably, employees who use such consumer services at home are increasingly expecting the same degree of choice and configurability at work – and for the applications they use to be delivered and updated just as frequently. They feel deeply the power of using digital technologies to transform and personalise the value of IT – but experience a huge gulf between the modern, mobile and cloud based solutions they use in their personal lives and the IT they are forced to use at work.

Filling this increasing expectation gap by delivering more business systems, more quickly is the major challenge for IT organisations today. But this requires us to rethink the way in which both business and IT organisations relate to and extract value from technology. Succeeding in a digital age means turning our traditional IT-centric thinking on its head – re-architecting our business for the cloud rather than attempting to re-architect the cloud for our business.

Re-architecting Corporate IT for the Cloud

At a time in which the need for technology in business is accelerating due to large scale digitisation, the modern IT department has seen its role as business innovator and enabler swamped by legacy systems, siloed data, locked-down processes and ever reducing budgets. There simply aren't enough resources available to evolve what's already running, never mind deliver on new digital-fuelled demands.

For many organisations the cloud appears to be a compelling option, promising to reduce cost and accelerate delivery. But many fail to realise that trying to architect the cloud to fit their business – i.e. simply trying to move existing systems, delivery practices and governance models to the cloud – only transfers the problem to a new environment. That slow, expensive and inflexible ERP system you run on-premise will still be the same slow, expensive and inflexible ERP system when you lift it up and redeploy it in the cloud. The understanding gaps between business and IT, the complexities of managing infrastructures and the time and risk of building systems in low level code all remain the same whether you deliver them on premise or you deliver them in the cloud – even when you move some aspects of infrastructure and middleware provisioning into software.

To deliver an exponentially higher level of change without exponentially higher levels of technical resource we need to re-architect IT organisations for the cloud, This means re-inventing the way we deliver business systems in order to fundamentally transform development productivity. It is no longer enough to make minor improvements by using virtual instead of physical servers or by choosing external data centre resources instead of internal ones. Cloud is driving an ever increasing level of abstraction, pushing us inexorably up the stack towards higher productivity platform as a service offerings. These platforms enable us to minimise the amount of time spent on the configuration and management of technology and instead maximise the time spent on delivering valuable business processes and applications.

Re-architecting the IT organisation for the cloud therefore means architecting it to let go of technology ownership and focus instead on high productivity cloud platforms which accelerate the delivery of core business applications – helping to close the gap between digital expectation and IT delivery capability.

Re-architecting Departmental IT for the Cloud

While maximising the productivity of people in the IT organisation is a critical imperative it will probably still not be enough. Some estimates have suggested that we will need the equivalent of 100 million new developers globally over the next few years if we are to deliver all of the technology change required by the large scale shift to digital models.

In the absence of sufficient support from IT colleagues we already see business users increasingly empowering themselves by turning to shadow IT – spreadsheets, 'quick and dirty' application development or third-party cloud services. These solutions may not fit corporate governance standards but they at least get the job done. While everyone can rage that cloud and other shadow IT creates huge potential security and scalability headaches it's hard to stop it without offering an alternative – especially when many of these systems are amongst the most business-centric in the enterprise. Built by the people who deliver services to customers on the front line, they often form the de facto backbone of many front office processes and so removing them would stop the business from functioning.

So how do we re-architect the way we think about departmental IT? How do we square a circle in which we cannot deliver sufficient IT change with the technical resources we have but we cannot allow ungoverned local activities to put the safety of the wider organisation at risk?

Effectively we turn this problem on its head. Instead of finding 100 million new people who can use technology we extend our technology platforms to empower the billions of other people who are already domain experts in their area. We continue the IT industry trajectory of increasing abstraction and simplification to actively empower non-technical users to create, integrate and share their own simple applications.

Re-architecting departmental IT for the cloud therefore means safely extending cloud platforms to non-technical users, freeing them to shape edge processes to their needs and bringing a huge new development capacity to bear on the less complex digital challenges of the business.

Re-architecting Business for the Cloud

By re-architecting our IT and business capabilities around the cloud in this way we can leverage them to deliver true digital systems at the pace increasingly required by our customers – both by accelerating our technical staff and by safely empowering a huge new pool of domain expert resources. Importantly by doing this based on a shared delivery platform we can build a new model of partnership – one which motivates employees by giving them control, accelerates innovation by empowering everyone and frees IT to focus on the most critical technology challenges without the distractions of less complex demands. By re-architecting the whole company around new approaches and putting a cloud platform at the heart of IT delivery, both technical and non-technical people can collaborate – prototyping, sharing ideas and scaling up successful innovations and changes wherever they come from.

This will mean corporate IT can fulfil its innovation and enablement promises to users and the business, delivering core business process change at a much higher tempo while simultaneously becoming an enabler for distributed innovation. Given a simple application platform to build on, individuals and teams can evolve their own solutions, knowing that they can try out ideas and find the best way to do their jobs without breaking rules or waiting for outside permission. Re-architecting the business around cloud technologies which empower people creates a truly innovative, digital speed business – while simultaneously resolving the conflicting challenges of speed and governance which dominate today's corporate IT agenda.

Ask not how you can re-architect the cloud for your business; ask how your business can be re-architectured for the cloud.