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Ellie Fields, Vice President of Product Marketing

Ready to go cloud.—What now?

6 Strategies for Transitioning to the Cloud

For the last few years we've been hearing about the benefits (and all the permutations!) of the cloud. And at this point, many of us agree the benefits are sizable and beneficial. So, let's say you've finally agreed that it's time to move to the cloud — what's next?

First off, it's worth noting that moving to the cloud doesn't have to be all-or-nothing. In fact, your best strategy is usually to start by solving a specific problem or taking advantage of a good opportunity. Companies that weren't "born in the cloud," meaning any company more than a couple years old, need a plan for going cloud. What new approaches will you adopt in the cloud? What systems will you sunset, and transition to cloud in the next incarnation? What systems work today and will always stay as they are? You may never be 100% cloud—and that's ok.

But to begin to go cloud, you do need a plan. Here are some strategies for transitioning to the cloud.

1. Get clear on the problem you're solving.

2. Leverage the cloud to rethink the way you do things.

3. Be as flexible as the cloud itself.

4. Plan for growth.

5. Gain credibility by communicating your insights clearly.

6. Enable your organization broadly.

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Get clear on the problem you're solving.

Moving to the cloud should be driven by a real business problem, not by an abstract desire to be in the cloud. For example, need a new HR management solution? Consider starting there. Evaluate the cloud offerings in that space, like Workday, SuccessFactors, and others. You'll likely have a faster implementation by going cloud, which means you'll get value fast, and you'll be able to start your transition without ripping out something that's working. And chances are you'll save money in the bargain.

Scott Moran, of Wild Tangent, has moved most of his company's data infrastructure to the cloud. He encourages people to look at the many cloud services offered as a toolkit. Select the right tool at the right time, and choose a tool that's the right size for the need.

Scott Moran, Director of Business Intelligence at WildTangent, said, "Essentially, you're renting access to the services." He noted that because service providers handle all hardware and networking, increasing capacity can be as low as fractions of a cent to scale out. Moran went on to state, "We've found that it is much easier to scale out infrastructure using your credit card than getting your Ops team up in the middle of the night to add server capacity… we can now easily scale up or down with a few mouse clicks."

Moran moved Wild Tangent's data architecture to the cloud piece by piece. He cautions that,in keeping with the analogy of the toolbox, you don't want to get all your tools out at once. Use one, finish the job, and move onto the next. This helps you keep your business running as you make the transition.

2.

Leverage the cloud to rethink the way you do things.

One of the major advantages of cloud services is that they offer a completely new way of doing things, whether in capabilities or pricing. If you've decided to move a system to the cloud, don't just replicate what you already have. Think of ways to leverage flexible pricing, elasticity and instant provisioning.

Cloud data warehouses are one example of new approaches to old problems. Systems like Amazon Redshift and Google BigQuery can be set up in minutes, as opposed to weeks, and can scale to fit the size of your data. These systems are optimized for analytics and they offer a path to insight from big data from devices, social media, or machine systems.

3.

Be as flexible as the cloud itself

The cloud is in a stage of rapid evolution. You're able to prototype as you go, and add volume when you've got it right. Keep an eye on new technologies and see how you can fit them into your workflows. Your best architecture today may not be your best architecture in a year, or even six months. A bit of tweaking can save you a lot of money.

As you consider new services, take advantage of the flexibility in the cloud. Elasticity is a characteristic of many cloud services. This means you can use (and pay for) a small amount at first and then scale dramatically when your concept is proven out. In the cloud, you can try things out without having to commit massive infrastructure or licensing costs up front.

You can also take advantage of different services to change your cost structure. For example, shifting your file system storage from Amazon S3 to the Amazon Glacier product, which offers slower access at a better cost, can save 2/3 of your storage costs for your data lake.

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I think we've realized over time that centralizing all of that data and trying to have one centralized group come up with all of the data-driven decision making just no longer works. And it's slow, too—it's extraordinarily slow.

Keith Rabin, President of Jetsuite.

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4.

Plan for growth.

One of the advantages of a cloud infrastructure is that you can scale up easily— as long as you've got the right infrastructure. Take the time upfront to get your systems working as you want them, whether they be cloud applications, data or analytics.

For example, you may be able to scale up your data collection overnight in the cloud—but if you've set up the wrong schema for collecting it, you'll have a lot of fixing to do. If your business starts growing, a good system can go a long way with you—but a bad one will only add to your headaches.

5.

Give your users a hand (or at least a single sign-on solution!).

One of the challenges with moving to the cloud is that your users may end up with a number of different username and password combinations to remember. Luckily, there's an app for that. Single Sign-On (SSO) solutions like OneLogin let your users use one password for many applications. This can significantly reduce user headaches and make users more open to adopting new solutions. It's a good idea to favor solutions that use SAML or OAuth so that you can make use of an SSO solution when you're ready.

6.

Enable your organization broadly.

Consider ways to allow many people to leverage the cloud. The cloud makes mobile access easy, so think about which applications would be more valuable if you integrated them into the flow of business better. Could you give your sales team mobile access to the CRM system or recruiters access to the HR system for when they're at events?

You can add even more value by broadening access to data. If you're building a data infrastructure in the cloud, think about how your businesspeople will be able to use that data. If you're moving to cloud applications, think about how you'll integrate the data with other data in your enterprise. Otherwise, the limiting factor in your cloud infrastructure will be the time of your data scientists.

One way to do this is to offer access to data, and the insights from it, via an analytics platform that can connect to multiple different kinds of data. This helps people who know your business, and who have the appropriate security access, get value from your data, and from the cloud. And you don't have to change your analytics platform every time you adopt a new data service.

To use an example I've seen in person: Keith Rabin, President of Jetsuite, talks about the value they've realized by adopting a system like Tableau Online for cloud analytics across their organization.
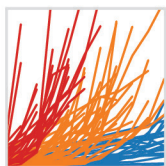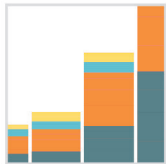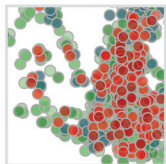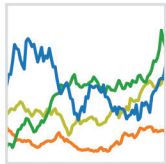
"I think we've realized over time that centralizing all of that data and trying to have one centralized group come up with all of the data-driven decision making just no longer works. And it's slow, too—it's extraordinarily slow," says Robin

"So we have to drive that decision-making and that power down to our managers, and they have to ultimately be responsible for it. In order to do that, you have to give them a tool that allows them to take these big data sets that come from different systems and different databases and be able to connect them all together and see the data that they need to see to make their decisions."

Those are just a few strategies for moving to the cloud. The good news about the cloud is, it's flexible, so different approaches will work. Be intentional, be incremental, and enjoy the atmosphere.

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