HOW TO DRIVE INNOVATION WITH THE CLOUD

Turn IT Into a “YES” TEAM That Helps Realize Your Organization’s Vision | BY WILLIAM TOLL

TODAY, “NO” ISN’T REALLY AN OPTION FOR THE CIO.

More and more, IT leaders are tasked by their board and C-suite to move their teams and technology away from “roadblock mode” and into being a driver of innovation and the company’s mission.

It’s an exciting prospect: utilizing technology to help the company increase profits, become more agile and innovative and beat the competition. Why wouldn’t any IT team jump at the chance to say “yes”?

Two words: time and resources.

Here’s how the scenario often plays out. The marketing team has read or heard from analysts and consultants that they need to take X customer data and apply it against Y customer data to have better insight into what prospective customers will be buying and
when, and how much they’re going to spend. In 2017, the benefits that big data and analytics implementations bring to marketing—moving it from reactive to predictive—are too great to miss.

Typically, marketing goes to IT and asks for new applications to be installed, configured and integrated to other systems and databases. Then they’re told, “Well, this data’s over here, that data’s over there, we can’t get new servers for six months and other departments have projects in line ahead of you.”

What could change this script? Two more words: the cloud.

**THE CLOUD AS OPPORTUNITY**

To explain the benefits of cloud, many experts use a car rental analogy. Instead of owning, maintaining, repairing and replacing your own vehicle, you can call a car company whenever you want. You pay only for the distance traveled, maintenance and repair is the provider’s problem, and the service can be scaled up or down depending on your needs. Other experts use the electric utility as an analogy: With the cloud, you can plug into the services of an expert outside provider for a much-needed resource.

Either way, the result is simplification for company operations. In the past, a company’s only choice was to build more server rooms and order more servers, storage and network devices. Now, it can securely install and maintain new applications and let managed service providers buy, install, configure and manage any number of servers, storage devices and the networks needed to connect them. And it all happens with the click of a button or a change management request—leaving the IT team to focus on core business goals.

To get to that place, a company first needs a solid commitment by the CEO to recognize the ways in which the digital transformation age is affecting the business—if for no other reason than that the competition is already doing so.

Next, the company needs a solid plan, as well as help from managed service providers and state-of-the-art platforms.

Let’s envision the journey to the cloud in three phases.

**PHASE ONE: ASSESSMENTS AND MIGRATIONS**

In this phase, the team analyzes its application portfolio and its cloud knowledge, and relates them to the company’s goals.

What are the priorities for applications? Which ones can never go down, because if they do go down, for example, four call centers with 600 reps in them can’t do any work and customers can’t be serviced?

Where are the in-house knowledge and training gaps? Does the team have the experience to make a transition from a data center to the cloud seamless? What legacy systems and operating models might be inhibiting the move to the next level?

How are the company’s goals prioritized? How does leadership rank things like increasing efficiency, increasing revenue, understanding data and designing better products or service levels? How do your company’s IT infrastructure and capabilities compare to that of your peers?
And, critically, which partners and technologies will provide the most effective tools for support?

If this seems like a complicated project, that’s because it is. Most companies find their best move in this situation is to work with an outside service provider, such as Navisite, with experienced teams that have been there and done that when it comes to cloud migrations. No two business transformations are alike. Seasoned experts can help sort through a company’s needs and potential, and set a timeline and milestones for progress.

Companies will also require a flexible platform that not only addresses current needs, but has innate flexibility and continues to innovate—such as Microsoft’s Azure Cloud. Azure can provide IaaS (Infrastructure-as-a-Service, which encompasses on-demand computing power and storage) and layers of PaaS (Platform-as-a-Service, a cloud-based application development platform). And Azure can do this across any of the popular cloud scenarios—public (which is analogous to renting space in a building), private (in which you rent the entire building) or a hybrid variation.

**PHASE TWO**

**IT TRANSFORMS**

In this phase, the IT team implements its new tools and increases efficiency. They may have brought in new cloud-based apps or new cloud infrastructure, and they will certainly have updated their processes.

Now they can go back to the marketing department and say, “Remember when we told you it would take six months to get the servers you needed for the new applications? Well, we can have those servers in two days, and our team can install and configure those applications in a few weeks.”

This IT transformation phase should include meeting specific initial goals, communicating the how and why of those achievements across the company and getting feedback from stakeholders to ensure that everyone, from senior executives on down, is on board with IT’s new ways.

Finance will move IT budgets from CAPEX to OPEX, and the IT team itself will modify its processes and documentation to support the partnership and responsibilities that a managed cloud service provider will handle. For example, as more users join the company or an acquisition is made, the IT team will work with a provider such as Navisite to expand an application’s ability to handle more users, or even run the application in a data center in Europe.

Throughout, the approach to IT transformation should be flexible, collaborative and iterative.

**PHASE THREE**

**THE BUSINESS TRANSFORMS**

Now things really get exciting. If a company is running its applications on a state-of-the-art cloud platform like Azure, it will have access to a vast range of tools and technologies that can put it at the cutting edge, combining the power of the IoT (Internet of Things) and advanced analytics. For example:

- **A factory** can place sensors throughout a facility. The data is gathered in a big database and analyzed to make production more efficient and truly meet the long-time goal of just-in-time parts delivery.

- **A large commercial farming organization** can analyze all the data it has about soil, weather and yield to maximize its output.
For example, a dairy farm can put sensors on cows that detect by their movement whether individual animals are healthy or not feeling so well that day. This data, fed into analytics capabilities, can forecast how much milk will be produced by each cow in a given time frame.

- A hotel chain can use “predictive maintenance” by collecting and analyzing data from connected assets. For example, each hotel room has its own air conditioning unit. Data reaped by wireless sensors could indicate that, when a unit’s blowers are not spinning at a certain speed, failure is likely to occur within two days. The maintenance team can intervene with preventive action that is much quicker and simpler than fixing a broken-down unit.

All of these wonders, and more, are happening daily. Global wealth manager UBS is using Azure to power its risk management; Maersk, the world’s largest shipping company, is reshaping global logistics and supply chains in the Microsoft cloud; and venerable candy company Hershey created an “Internet of Twizzlers” by adding sensors to its production line and using machine learning, with significant help from Azure, to improve its manufacturing process.

The list of big names goes on. But that’s not to say that your company needs to be a global behemoth or major brand to take advantage of digital transformation. Azure can scale up or down, as needed, to deal with issues every company faces at one time or another—the need to cut costs, to store sensitive data long-term, to enable easy but secure access for remote workers and, of course, to use advanced capabilities such as analytics and IoT.

Can your company make the digital transformation that your employees, partners and customers require? Of course. It all begins with saying “yes.”

Azure is today’s fastest-growing cloud platform and is well positioned to become the leading cloud choice among CIOs. It’s a single, go-to platform that makes it easy for enterprise users to run hybrid deployments with cloud-based and on-premises solutions, and allows organizations to use the virtual machines running both Linux and Windows operating systems. Its analytics prowess and scalability mean Azure can play a role for companies of all sizes, in any region of the world, in a virtually endless number of ways.

One thing to remember is that Azure is not simple. The platform depth that makes it so valuable requires considerable Microsoft and Azure expertise to help a business get the most out of its investment. Here’s where Navisite shines as a Managed Microsoft Azure provider:

Know-how: At Navisite, experts hold more than 400 Microsoft certifications and 100 Azure certifications, and are a critical resource for maximizing a company’s Azure investment.

Ongoing support: You’ll have expert guidance not only for cloud migrations and integration, but for routine IT tasks, such as monitoring and patching, that otherwise eat up IT resources and stifle innovation. You’ll also have the benefit of 24/7/365 monitoring from the Navisite Service Center.

Control: Navisite’s online Proximity Client Interface portal tells you all you need to know about events, resolutions, server performance, thresholds exceeded and more.

Change management: Cloud strategies are constantly evolving with new offerings, features, security issues, budget frameworks and more. Navisite experts have seen this back-and-forth a lot, understand it and can help clients with these issues.

Security and uptime: Microsoft’s “shared responsibility model” for data breaches makes it imperative to know exactly where your company is liable. Navisite cloud security experts help you understand where your responsibility begins and ends, and also how to use Azure mechanisms to reduce risks and maximize uptime.

Keeping up with Azure: When you become an Azure client, you will receive frequent notifications about pricing and service updates, as well as reminders of which portal you should be using for which service. Our Navisite Managed Azure experts are always up on the latest changes and enhancements, so clients don’t have to be.

For more information about Navisite Managed Azure Service, visit Navisite.com or call 866-206-9694.

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