Basic Questions To Ask Your Cloud Provider

Part 1

What should customers be looking for and expect from a good cloud service provider?

At a basic level, the customer should look for reassurances that services will be provided as agreed and expected. This is no different to any other service, including IT and non-IT services.

One aspect of measuring and evaluating good service provision resides in comparisons of the cloud service providers adoption and practical application of standards, frameworks and methodologies.

The best practices advocated by frameworks such as ITIL / DevOps and standards such as ISO/IEC 20000 (service management) and ISO/IEC 27001 (security), for example, are still required to ensure a best practice and quality driven approach is applied to the design, management and improvement of both IT and cloud services. The current standards, models and frameworks are still catching up and being modified to remain relevant in a cloud and digital world.

So there are gaps. Does you cloud providers have any gaps in the design and delivery of their clouds and digital services? How would you know?

What questions should be asked of a cloud service provider?

Even though the adoption of cloud computing and cloud services is increasing significantly, many organizations may not know what questions they should be asking of their cloud service providers to reassure themselves of the quality, utility and warranty of services.

The following section presents a number of basic yet important questions and considerations to discuss with cloud service providers. There are provided in no particular order.

What ITIL / DevOps best practices, security and data protection standards and guidelines are in use by the cloud service provider?

This question seek to find out what best practices are in place and in use by the cloud service provider. The level of adoption can be an indicator as to how well services are likely to be provided, as well as how much focus is placed on the utility and warranty aspects of cloud computing and cloud services.

Where will your data and your customer's data reside?

This presents questions about which legal jurisdiction applies to the data, who has access to the data from a legal perspective and also what data protection

laws come into effect. Many organizations have a defined policy regarding access to data and the legislation that will apply to the data. Be sure to ask about your organisations data and also your customer data, which is just as important.

What availability levels are provided?

Some cloud providers may impose their service levels, including service availability, on the customer and not provide flexibility to match what the customer requires. This can be a factor when dealing with all sizes of cloud service providers.

Customers should consider the following questions:

— What are the default or standard levels of availability (e.g. for public cloud offerings)

— What level of availability is the cloud service provider willing to provide to the customer's organization

— What level of availability is required by the customer and does it match that provided by the cloud provider

— Can the cloud service provider offer the flexibility to provide availability service levels in line with the customer's requirements?

What continuity plans are in place for recovering data, infrastructure and applications?

Typical questions customers should ask include:

— Can data be recovered

— What data can be recovered

— How long will it take to recover data

— What priority will my organization's data be recovered, in the event of a large data issue for the cloud service provider

— Are continuity plans documented, clearly defined and up to date

— Can the cloud service provider make available an end-to-end continuity plan?

What level of service resilience and backup is provided within the service?

Even if the cloud service provider has a continuity plan in place, customers need to check what level of service resilience and backup is provided as part of the service. Customers may assume that their applications and services are fully resilient and backed-up, only to find out during a service outage that they have inadequate arrangements in place for these areas.

The example below illustrates this point well:

At some point a cloud service provider has to patch their systems. If they do this during out-of-hours in the GMT time zone, it will be in-hours in another time zone. This could have a knock-on effect to the delivery of services locally to cloud customers in the in-hours time zone, especially if server reboots have to occur.

Does the service provider have a service desk function based on ITIL / DevOps principles?

The fundamental question is what support is provided by the cloud service provider.

Customers should consider the following:

— How will the service desk function

— Does the cloud service provider offer sufficient support coverage and hours of support

— What are the service level agreements (SLAs) for answering calls and do these meet the needs of the customer

— Is the cloud service provider's service desk local, onshore or offshore? Is there a potential language issue?

What metrics will be provided and are they relevant?

Metrics are an important tool in understanding the level of service provided. Cloud service providers should work closely with the customer to ensure that the metrics are useful, relevant and easily understood. ITIL service level management and business relationship management will assist with defining appropriate service metrics and service targets. DevOps measurements also to be considered.

Does the service provider's change management process match the customer's needs?

Typical issues and questions which arise include:

— How will changes to the services provided by the cloud service provider be managed

— Will the customers and consumers be notified? Will they have a say in the changes being made and when

— How much control will the customer have over any changes

— How will changes affect the customer's services?

Does the cloud service provider require third-party providers in order to deliver services?

It is quite common for service providers to rely on other service providers and suppliers to provide them with certain capabilities they do not have in-house. The same premise applies to cloud service providers. In general, cloud service providers will rely on other cloud service providers and third-party suppliers to provide cloud platforms, applications and capabilities. This is also known as service aggregation and service arbitrage.

Therefore it is incumbent on the customer to understand the level of reliance their cloud service provider has on other third-party suppliers. For some organizations, this is a standard due diligence exercise. For other organizations, this will be a new exercise to be undertaken.

Customers should consider:

— What third party providers are required to provide the key cloud services

— Does the cloud service provider have sufficient back-to-back supporting contracts with the third-party providers to ensure service provision to the customer?

How does the cloud provider scale to meet your needs and immediate increases in cloud and compute services?

One of the five aspects of cloud computing is the ability to scale – increase and decrease – services quickly. It is important to ask cloud service providers how quickly they can scale up and down.

Typical questions customers should ask include:

— Can the cloud systems, platforms and applications scale in line with the customer's requirements

— Can the cloud services provide enough resources and extra capacity to meet increased demand from all of their customers?

Initial basic questions to get you started with your cloud adoption journey.

This is part of a series of articles looking at basics questions to ask your cloud provider.

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