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### Cloud Integration: Discover the 'productivity app' for the cloud

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Cloud computing has become, in certain ways, the eat-right-and-get-some-exercise of IT infrastructures.

By this I mean that everybody's heard the message, and everybody knows the potential benefits... but not everybody actually follows through to the degree they could, or should, to get the best possible results. Even in 2012, the world is full of organizations that remain cloud holdouts. (I won't go so far as to call them cloud Luddites.)

Now, there are a number of valid reasons for this reluctance -- security and compliance, for instance, are major worries for certain sensitive applications, which aren't likely to migrate outside company walls any time soon.

Guaranteed performance is another common issue. For certain particularly business-crucial applications, like ERP, many organizations are simply not willing to trust a shared architecture like cloud in which many different services execute in parallel. So instead they're sticking with a tried-and-true, dedicated architecture to play it safe.

This, however, means that the information locked away in those applications can't easily be leveraged in other ways, and for other reasons -- very awkward and unfortunate for business purposes.

Fortunately, there's a good compromise: hybrid cloud models that deliver a sort of best-of-both-worlds approach. In short, you put your cloud-friendly apps in the cloud, leave the other apps (perhaps compliance-sensitive or ERP apps) in your conventional, in-house infrastructure and then integrate them as cleanly as you can to meet your needs.

Getting this done, however, means finding clever ways to get information flowing as it should between the two architectures. And by clever, what I really mean is fast, cost-efficient and yet complete, migrating all the information you want (and none of the information you don't) into the cloud.

How to make that happen? One way would be to try and custom code the interfaces between these apps.

But anybody with IT experience is probably already cringing at that idea. It might yield complete results, but it's not likely to be either fast or cost-efficient.

Is there a pragmatic plan B? Turns out there is.

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**Accelerate almost any hybrid cloud initiative via fast, seamless information integration**

Recently I talked with Chandar Pattabhiram, who drives go-to-market strategy for the IBM WebSphere® Cast Iron product line. And he confirmed for me that indeed hybrid cloud models are increasingly attractive -- if you can take care of your information-migration needs in a business-optimized way.

'It's a hybrid world today and will continue to be so for a long time,' said Pattabhiram. 'Integration has become a critical component of this hybrid world because companies need to rapidly connect the new cloud services they're adopting with the rest of the on-premise applications. And that's where IBM WebSphere Cast Iron Cloud Integration capabilities can really lend a helping hand.'

Does 'Cast Iron' ring a bell for you? If you're an IT pro, you may recall that in 2010  IBM acquired Cast Iron  -- a leading provider of solutions designed to integrate cloud and in-house apps in an accelerated way.

 The Cast Iron technology  thus turns out to target the exact 2012 scenario I describe above -- a company wants to link its own apps seamlessly with cloud apps in a hybrid model, generating the least possible complexity, costs and risks along the way.

'Integration has become the 'productivity application' for cloud computing,' said Pattabhiram. 'Without integration, cloud users can wind up 'swivel chairing' -- trying to alternate between two completely different architectures to get access to critical business information in a rather clumsy way. But with integration, they get all the information they want in one place: the cloud. Net result is that integration helps companies maximize productivity, increase adoption and also maximize the value of their cloud investment.'

**Drag and drop your way to cloud nirvana**

How exactly does IBM WebSphere Cast Iron Cloud Integration work this magic?  The answer is basically threefold: **(1)** Out-of-the-box templates and **(2)** special functions, both of which are managed via a simple drag-and-drop interface, and, if necessary, **(3)** custom scripting to handle the rare odd case.

Let's look at the templates first -- the heart of the solution. These have been developed based on the premise that companies struggling with integration issues are quite often dealing with the same groups of applications.

I mentioned ERP before; SAP apps are a good example along those lines. And migrating the information from SAP into the cloud really means, typically, migrating it into a particular cloud environment/application. One very common example: Salesforce.com.

So, to reflect this situation, the Cast Iron solution includes hundreds of templates to perform such jobs, each designed for a particular type of migration such as SAP-to-Salesforce. And in the majority of cases, a template will be found that (following a wizard-driven Q&A and basic validation checks) does the necessary job right out of the box.

How does that sound in terms of our previous evaluative criteria ('complete, fast and cost-efficient')? Pretty fair, I'd say.

Now, there are certainly going to be cases where not every data record lines up perfectly between the two infrastructures; a little jiggering may be required. In scenarios like that, the Cast Iron solution also provides a range of handy data modification functions. Imagine, for instance, that you need to combine two text strings from the SAP data set into a single text string in the Salesforce application. To do that, you could use the concatenation function, which glues the two strings together. Problem solved, and we still haven't left the drag-and-drop interface.

What if you need a function that's not provided? In that scenario, you can just write your own in Javascript. Admittedly, this isn't drag-and-drop anymore, but it's still a pleasantly long way from the pain of rewriting your apps in a language like Java or C++.

So when you add up the convenience and capabilities, IBM WebSphere Cast Iron Cloud Integration strikes me as a tidy solution to a very common problem. Furthermore, thanks to the way it can be tweaked and modified as needed, it works well even in cases where the in-house app is completely homegrown,

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and there's therefore no template available.

Pattabhiram sees things the same way. 'The templates are remarkably comprehensive, but, no, they won't work for all scenarios,' he said. 'Still, even for home-grown applications, Cast Iron's 'configuration, not-coding' approach is the way to go -- much faster and much less expensive than trying to custom code the interfaces between these apps. '

The final step, following the new orchestration across the two architectures you've just created, is to export it to an appropriate form factor for your needs. Specifically, we're talking about one of three options: **(a)** a physical server, **(b)** a virtual server or **(c)** a cloud-based service. The Cast Iron solution can be used for all three. That's a range of choices to fit any customer's requirements, and it also avoids locking them into a specific architecture or business process that, down the road, they might want to change.

'Integrating the cloud doesn't always really mean integration in the cloud,' said Pattabhiram. 'What we've seen is that customers choose amongst a variety of form factors -- physical appliances, virtual appliance or integration as a service -- for their cloud integration needs. The key is to provide this flexibility of deployment options to customers depending on their size and IT environment.'

Maybe all of that sounds a little theoretical to you, and you need a little proof-of-concept? Take a look at the situation faced by Siemens Energy.

These guys faced the exact scenario I describe above -- an SAP-to-Salesforce hybrid cloud integration for significantly faster mirroring of information and key performance metrics across the two environments. And not only did the Cast Iron solution get the job done, it got it done in under two weeks.

How does your organization measure up? What's your cloud integration strategy?

**Additional Information**

Learn more about Connectivity and Integration

Connect business and IT leadership at Impact 2012

View this demo on Integrating Cloud to ERP with 'No Coding'

See how to leverage Integration Platform as a Service in this White Paper

**About the author**
*Guest blogger Wes Simonds worked in IT for seven years before becoming a technology writer on topics including virtualization, cloud computing and service management. He lives in sunny Austin, Texas and believes Mexican food should always be served with queso.*

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