Why your business needs a cloud architect

By Colin Thornton

21 Feb 2019

As IT and business strategy align, cloud architects will become integral to growth.

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As South African businesses look to streamline operational costs and become more globally competitive, cloud computing has become essential. And with the imminent launch of Microsoft Azure and Amazon Web Service data centres in South Africa, local cloud adoption will become even more attractive.

According to the World Wide Worx Cloud Africa 2018 report, cloud computing is rising sharply in the economic hubs of South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria - with 74% of the SA companies surveyed increasing their cloud expenditure during 2017. The report noted that in the coming year, over 80% of SA companies would be looking to up their cloud spend. While making the shift to the cloud is a positive step, businesses have to ensure that the process is managed correctly – from the initial transition, right through to proactive, daily management.

Negotiating complexity

For larger businesses, especially those relying on legacy software and/or hardware, moving fully to the cloud, and ensuring sustainability, can be complex. Even businesses with modern software and hardware may find this new paradigm, so completely different from traditional approaches, difficult.

This complexity requires a careful, skilled and managed approach – which is best handled by what the IT industry terms a 'cloud architect.' As the name implies, the cloud architect is responsible for designing the cloud computing environment in an organisation, which encompasses the platforms, servers, storage, delivery and networks.

In addition to the planning and designing, cloud architects also need to provide guidance throughout a development or deployment project and then manage the maintenance and support thereafter. Savvy cloud architects will take ownership of these systems and environments throughout their entire lifecycle - from the initial requirements analysis through to retirement.

Importantly, the cloud architect role is very different to more traditional IT roles, because it is not only technical in nature. There is a critical business and financial element required. Indeed, a skilled cloud architect will seek to understand what kinds of competitive advantages are required, the relevant functionalities that are needed, and the unique business requirements that the system architecture needs to deliver on. Moreover, the cloud architect will be responsible for sourcing and managing the right vendors such as Microsoft or Amazon; contracting suitable suppliers and deciding upon the right APIs and standards.

Aligning business needs

As cloud computing becomes more ubiquitous and IT Departments more streamlined, the role may quickly evolve into a financial and strategic position. Given that the cloud architect will be handling budgets, forecasts, reports, etc, he or she could soon be sitting within the Finance Department – as opposed to a rapidly shrinking IT Department!

When exploring the appointment of a cloud architect, it's important to consider that letting a more traditional (and technically oriented) IT professional handle cloud strategy can backfire. This is simply because technical professionals prefer to have control of their systems. There's often a subconscious bias away from 'putting everything in the cloud and letting someone else manage it'.

However, while there is more flexibility when a business controls everything (e.g. with a private cloud or an on-premise server) there are often inflated costs and added risk. Increasingly, businesses are recognising that there are major advantages to relinquishing elements of flexibility and outsourcing most of the traditional IT services. And with a skilled cloud architect managing the relationships, businesses can arguably enjoy the best of both worlds – enhancing efficiency while reducing both costs and risk.

Recruiting for growth

Given that this kind of role is still so new, businesses will be hard pressed to find experienced candidates off the bat. Today, leaders should rather be looking for candidates who come from roles that are closely related – and then looking for experience in other key aspects.

For example, a network architect who has reported into a finance department; or an MBA who has a strong technical background. First and foremost, a great cloud architect will be able to grasp the business requirements – and then develop systems from there.

For instance, these requirements may relate to growing profits/revenue or decreasing costs, and a good Architect needs to figure out how the cloud can help achieve these goals. Moreover, a savvy cloud architect will have strong administration skills as well as highly developed interpersonal skills - as he or she will be managing key vendor relationships.

As businesses expand into an environment in which the lines between IT, finance, and strategy are increasingly blurred, professionals such as the skilled cloud architect will become integral to growth, innovation and sustainability.

ABOUT COLIN THORNTON

Colin founded Dial a Nerd in 1998 as a consumer IT support company and in 2002 the business-focused division was founded. Supporting SMEs is now its primary focus. In 2015 his company, merged with Turrito Networks who provided niche internet services outside of the local network. These two companies have created an end-to-end IT and Communication solution for SMEs. Colin has subsequently become the managing director of Turrito. Contact him at info@dialanerd.co.za

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