With the likes of AWS and Microsoft Azure monopolising the market with their cloud services, talk quickly turns to vendor lock in. What are the potential downsides of being dependent on one vendor for all of your IT services?

In the cloud computing market most of the large vendors want to be a one stop shop for IT. From infrastructure to software, one vendor could provide your entire IT system.

Naturally users want a reliable cloud host, but it could be dangerous to put all your eggs in one basket. With the increase in hacking and large-scale DDoS attacks, some users are put off by having their entire business in the hands of one service provider.

What legacy IT companies like Oracle or IBM have done in the past is make the user so dependent on the product or service that they won't be able to ditch it further along the line.

As IBM make their own hardware and software, there's still a degree of vendor lock in today.

AWS

AWS dominate the cloud industry, with their market share massively ahead of the competition. And there's no sign of handing over the throne just yet. They offer the easy to spin up servers and pay on demand template that so many Devs and big data companies love to use.

AWS are clever though. They don't make it easy to move to a new provider, and some of their technologies are not compatible with other systems. AWS have also rolled out more products to compete with offerings from legacy software giants, such as a database migration tool to move Oracle or Microsoft SQL Server databases over to AWS.

AWS platforms are designed to use their format and save you money, meaning that it's immovable without significant changes. Whilst AWS are busy giving customers more options and services, their main aim is for customer retention.

Fancy a lock in?

Imagine that you built your platform using Microsoft Azure – whilst all the basic cloud services like compute and storage are easily replicated with a new provider, what about the databases and applications?

The *'don't get locked in'* checklist:

1. Due diligence
Do your homework. Check that the supplier is going to deliver everything that you need, and then you won't have to leave anyway. Discuss your cloud set up, resources, features etc

2. Cloud pre-nup
Have a detailed implementation plan, but also make sure you know what the exit plan and costings are upfront i.e. who is responsible for extracting data, and where is it stored before being transferred to a new provider.

3. Be proactive
Try and minimise early risks of vendor lock in. Keep applications as flexible as possible, and not vendor specific. For instance, you can keep cloud components linked with application components, rather than creating a lot of mess later on if you want to move providers. It's good to back up your data regularly in an easily useable format to eliminate any future mishaps.

Also choosing a VMware host, or one with more standardisations like a dedicated cloud SQL server, would be more beneficial than a SQL service with Azure, which is difficult to migrate.

4. Consider multi-cloud
A lot of bigger companies mix things up for security reasons. Consider having one provider for backups, compute, DR etc.

5. DevOps
DevOps is the future. Reconfiguring applications to run on a new platform is time consuming and expensive. Using Docker containers would mean that you can isolate software and have them running on top of your infrastructure. Docker containers are easy to relocate and rebuild, which saves a lot of hassle if moving over to a new provider. Also, configuration management tools like Chef and Puppet can be used to automate the configuration of your infrastructure.

Migration pains

One of the biggest issues with moving to another hosting provider is migrating your data. This is often how vendors lock users in, because it's so damn difficult and expensive to migrate data. Some users even stay with a provider even if they don't meet their needs, just to avoid the inconvenience and risk of migrating. A lot of suppliers don't make this process easy.

Biggest migration pitfalls:

Inefficient processes – won't translate to new provider

Contractual constraints

Expensive

Data might be in wrong format between providers

Might have to move data back to the customer's site first, before moving it to the new host. Do you have space?

Have an exit plan

2 years deep into a relationship that probably won't work out?

Every cloud user should consider what the risks are with their hosting provider.
When moving to the cloud and designing your platform, it's all about the pre-nup.
Make sure your cloud strategy allows you to keep your options open, and you know how to get your data out in the future if you need to.

The big market players are bound to come up with more products and services to entice you away from the competition.
But if the past few years are anything to go by, having separate security and disaster recovery options could be important for business continuity.

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