

Taking Africa to the next level of Business Continuity

JUSTIN LORD THE IMPACT OF CLOUD COMPUTING ON BUSINESS CONTINUITY

Cloud computing is changing the way that businesses and governments access IT. It is based on a relatively simple premise: why invest capital in buying ICT infrastructure when you can rent capacity from an experienced technology company? The idea has spread from Infrastructure as a Service (IaaS) to Platform as a Service (PaaS) and then onto Software and Application Platforms as a Service.

This change affects the way that business processes supported by IT—like business continuity—are accessed. In fact, cloud computing can totally transform business continuity's cost structure and the value it adds to the enterprise.

Cloud computing has particular relevance to Africa. The continent is increasingly being seen as the next growth frontier in a

world hungry for new markets. If the continent is to maximize its growth potential, African businesses must equip themselves to compete with their global peers—something that IT will help them to do.

For various reasons, much of Africa missed out on several phases of IT development over the past few decades. That could be seen as an advantage as it positions African companies to leapfrog to the most modern technologies. Specifically, by using cloud computing, Africa can gain access to the latest and greatest technology without making capital investments.

Achieving this flexibility depends on a very important precondition: bandwidth and plenty of it. In other words, for Africa to seize the chance to leapfrog its global competitors by using cloud computing, af-

fordable bandwidth is vital.

There is no reason why this should not be possible—several new undersea cables have landed or will soon land at various points along Africa's coastline (Seacom, EASSy, SAT-3 and WACS, to name just a few). African countries then have to put the national infrastructure in place to get the bandwidth to users—and sort out any existing regulatory issues.

Cloud's impact on business continuity

Business continuity has steadily grown in importance as ICT has become more and more central to the very functioning of business. If systems go down or data is lost, the business literally cannot function. In order to safeguard both systems and the data they contain, companies tend to follow a co-location strategy, which involves the hiring or purchase of server capacity in a dedicated data centre hosted by a specialist business continuity provider.

This capacity is only used when disaster strikes and the company's servers are rebuilt manually on it, using back-up tapes. In terms of this model, a company is essentially paying for infrastructure that stands idle for most of

the time—something that can often be seen as wasteful when things are going well!

Cloud computing can turn the whole business continuity equation on its head because it allows processing capacity for business continuity to be purchased as a service. Coupled with the available bandwidth, this capacity could be used to replicate a company's systems in the protected environment maintained by the continuity service provider. Of course, a secure network would be required for this replication.

More to the point, the data would be available almost immediately in the event of an emergency, without the need for backup tapes to be physically taken to the disaster recovery site and the IT environment manually reconstructed.

Bandwidth combined with the cloud computing approach can thus radically improve the effectiveness of business continuity—but the basic model is unaffected. The capacity dedicated for business continuity remains essentially unused and on standby.

Transforming the business continuity model

Taking this thinking a step further, it is now possible for a company to subscribe to

a dedicated resource pool of virtual server space, again provided as a service by the business continuity provider—but to use that capacity for whatever it wants in the normal run of events.

In other words, infrastructure capacity rented for business continuity becomes an asset to the IT department and can be used to reduce in-house capacity or extend it—whichever is most appropriate.

Again, this assumes the availability of adequate and affordable connectivity between the company's premises and those of the business continuity provider.

Africa is ready to adopt this model, and ContinuitySA is already consulting widely across the continent—and our existing data centres in South Africa are complemented by ones in Botswana, Mauritius and Mozambique. (We are currently investigating options in Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria and West Africa.)

All that we need, as I have argued, is abundant, affordable bandwidth. ■

