# Educators need help to keep their head in the cloud game

By Esther Matshego

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There's no shortage of comment about how the pandemic fast-tracked digitalisation, where companies that may have been delaying the inevitable had their hands forced by the biggest black swan event in living memory. It's no different for education institutions, many of which had to scramble quickly to enable remote and distance learning and faculty management. Education institutions, so long bastions of tradition, now understand that they must innovate to differentiate in a changed world.



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Whether it's a large public university, a smaller private institution or a Tvet college, institutions of higher learning are faced with the reality of needing to keep up with the world to cater to the generation Zs and millennials that populate campuses. Staff, too, need the best tools to deliver classes and manage internal affairs.

The most important digitalisation move that an institution will make is to embrace the cloud, not for the cloud's sake, but because it's the only way it will be able to deliver excellence in our fast-paced, digital world. However, any institution that has dipped its toes into the world of the cloud knows that it's easier said than done because, in almost every instance, there needs to be an entire mindset shift among all users, sufficient education to get the most out of various cloud applications and a healthy dose of budgetary reality.

## Advisors - what's the point?

Knowledgeable advisors play a crucial role in the digital journeys of educational institutions - not as salespeople. On the contrary, the ideal conversations between advisors and institutions should centre around providing the best advice, with optimisation front and centre. That's the barometer, as it were. What's the point of any investment in the cloud if it has not fundamentally improved an organisation and made it better and more efficient at delivering its services?

Let's not beat around the bush. Money is scarce in education - there just isn't an endless stream of budget waiting to be used. Rather, the advisor should be making sure an institution is buying and working with technology that helps it differentiate and innovate - without spending more than it needs to.

Software licensing is a complex world and is always evolving and it needs to be demystified lest more organisations find themselves in very deep holes at worst or underwhelmed at best. A good advisor keeps its clients informed and on the front foot so that they are aware of pending changes and updates before the cloud software provider itself makes contact.

## Where does it go wrong?

Let's take a look at some of the common cloud pitfalls in South Africa's education institutions. In most instances, users are spinning up cloud services, such as Microsoft Azure, without any control or usage structure. In these instances, our teams work very closely with the organisation to help users understand what they have subscribed to and how to use it. Perhaps the most important part of this process is education on how usage affects costs. A great analogy we use at Altron Karabina is to imagine a tap being turned on. It needs to be turned off or you'll continue using, and wasting, water. Users must understand this concept and what turning off the taps would entail in an Azure environment, for example. Just this light bulb moment can result in massive cost savings.

## Everyone, including IT, must come to the cloud party

Education institutions have a variety of people who are subject matter experts in other fields but have not yet developed enough knowledge about the cloud and what it is. Similarly, IT departments at these institutions have often been running things a certain way for many years. There are instances where there is resistance to a broad move to the cloud out of the misguided fear that it would result in their job insecurity.

In addition to this, the very nature of a traditional place of higher learning is that it operates in silos and so communication is all but non-existent.

It's important that advisors follow a few key steps to bring organisations up to speed. This includes:

- **Evangelism** - every person, from lecturer to IT administrator, must understand the power that can be unlocked by switching to the cloud.

- **Education** - what do you have, what should you have and how do you use it properly? If you are an IT manager, resisting a move to the cloud will have serious consequences for the institution at large. If Microsoft bills a campus annually and it does not use up the services it was billed for, it is lost. Many millions of rands are lost this way every year. While it cannot be refunded, services can be reserved and so the "how and why" of reservation becomes a key education focus.

- **A change in mindset** - a move to the cloud is more than just turning on a computer. It's about understanding that new processes will replace the old and how the move to the cloud will be negatively affected - or even nullified - if this doesn't occur. Perhaps the biggest change is shattering silos and opening institutional communication. How does my cloud usage affect yours, and if I do this, what does it mean for you?

- **Talk to the right people** - the advisors should be speaking to the people who will be using the software, but crucially also those who will be using the subscription and who have administration rights, which means the ability to spin up the services. There needs to be responsibility for data backup and management and protection, among other key cloud considerations.

- **Building long-term relationships** - An advisor should be having quarterly meetings with institutions at a minimum, while in many instances it would need to be monthly or more. The whole point is to ensure that the organisation buys the products and services that fulfil its objectives. But it doesn't end there. Microsoft has a framework where it signs 36-month contracts. The advisor should be with the organisation along this journey to ensure that the products are being used properly and efficiently, and if there needs to be a change, what it should be and what form it should ideally take to keep costs down and innovation up. Beyond this, there are often changes in human resources and new people need to go through the same education as those before them did.

- **The 36-month contract, billed annually** - which gives advisors sufficient time to help institutions squeeze out savings - is a good timeframe. It enables campuses and advisors to build long-term relationships that deliver innovation that matters.

Microsoft, for example, offers an array of discounts to education institutions and so more and more campuses will complete their moves into the cloud in the coming months and years. This move is crucial to remaining competitive and relevant as a modern education institution. However, as with all good things, if mismanaged it can go wrong quickly, which comes at a hefty price tag. Thankfully, this pain can be reversed and prevented.

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