

Converged solutions - and re-purposed IT - can drive innovation

Businesses that move towards hyperconverged solutions are most likely to close the skills gap, release big data and drive innovation, according to a research report by VCE, the converged platforms division of EMC. In addition, says Barry Cashman, EMEA VP for VCE, the move to converged infrastructure will help traditional IT departments to be re-purposed into business-savvy units that drive customer satisfaction.



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VCE surveyed more than 2,700 business and IT professionals in Europe, the Middle East and Africa and came up with an extensive report detailing the current IT landscape. The report is entitled 'Endangered IT: IT needs to reclaim technology or lose its voice forever.'

Cashman says the research clearly revealed what IT teams are worried about, what they are prioritising this year and where the opportunities are. It generally paints a picture of organisations where IT departments and the rest of the business are often not on the same page on a range of issues.

“The message of the report is simple: In a rapidly shifting IT landscape, businesses that manage to build cohesive digital systems that pull together all departments into rendering a single, customer-focused service, stand to benefit greatly,” Cashman explained. “That is, if they stop building infrastructure as they always have, and instead invest in buying hyperconverged solutions that will ease their transition.”

Extracting value from data is the new frontier

Cashman says the fact that most businesses are increasingly focused on their ability to manage and extract value from the data generated in the process of selling products, rather than the products themselves, is a good thing. “For example, 80% of those surveyed feel that implementing a more advanced and agile IT infrastructure would reduce risk and complexity and provide a solid platform for future growth. Nearly half are already training IT professionals in skills, including converged infrastructure, cloud computing and business skills,” he says, adding that IT needs to learn the language of business just as the rest of the business needs to learn the language of technology.

Reducing risk; preparing for growth

VCE suggests – and 80% of respondents agree – a scaleable, flexible, converged infrastructure would reduce risk by providing a solid foundation for business growth and innovation. “Of course, to maintain full control over the transition, CIOs need to stop spending so much time building and managing different infrastructure components.

“It’s no longer enough to just keep the lights on. Instead, they need to transform IT into an efficient, business-focused engine that can scale rapidly in response to changing business needs. This demands a modern data centre, one that revolves around robust, software-defined, converged infrastructure. Convergence can power more agile development and increased speed to market, addressing directly some of the top IT challenges identified.”

To remain competitive in the future, the business needs to focus on developing and releasing new, value-added products and services. This means that IT needs to be free to focus on meeting business goals, and a converged infrastructure is what will enable it to do so.

The growing need for new tech

However, according to the report 68% of CIOs currently see IT in the traditional sense as a barrier to innovation. Almost two-thirds of CIOs felt that the IT team was losing its grip on the technology that is held and used across the business. The more technology is embedded, the more traditional IT becomes marginalised, a phenomenon the report calls 'invisible IT', not shadow IT. Cashman says power is shifting away from IT, in that ideas are being implemented there, rather than germinating there.

“They fear that this could lead to IT inhibiting, rather than enabling innovation if they do not have the right infrastructure or tools. This lack of preparation for current technological shifts could result in their businesses losing all relevance within the next three years, as their likely future competitors will be agile organisations that do not even exist yet. After all, it’s not surprising to feel out of your depth when you’re working against invisible competitors.”

The gap between IT and business leaders

In addition, many CIOs and business leaders voiced concern that they felt ill-prepared for the technological shifts taking place in the economy. Many are worried that business growth may expose their IT teams as under-prepared (68%) and may put excessive pressure on existing IT operations, damaging customer satisfaction and brand reputation (69%).

They agreed that a new infrastructure and a fresh skills set in their IT departments are needed to meet long-term needs, as technology becomes embedded across the business. But most felt they were not progressing sufficiently. This could be because all these divisions often don't speak to each other, explains Cashman.

"Even when they do, they talk in a completely different set of languages. The storage individual doesn't understand the network perspective, and the network person doesn't understand the server person's problem. The languages they use are embedded in the technologies they have ownership of. CIOs are isolated both from their C-suite colleagues and from their own IT teams, sometimes lacking faith in the ability of IT professionals and infrastructure to meet emerging business needs."

IT can enable customer satisfaction

As challenging as it might be, businesses have to evolve their traditional IT infrastructure and culture to meet the challenges of big data, operational complexity and real-time business.

"Business leaders can help the IT function adapt, professionally and culturally, to the concept of IT infrastructure as an advanced, on-demand utility it can use rather than manage; something to buy rather than build. IT also needs to adapt to becoming a multi-disciplinary function, able to quickly respond to the challenges of releasing value from big data," says Cashman.

"The time that a converged solution will save, will release IT professionals to share their expertise across the business; listening, understanding and enabling. This is the key to reclaiming IT relevance." Cashman says IT tends to have a "build it yourself" mentality whereas business leaders "are more comfortable acquiring the building blocks for IT".

Businesses need 'cloud people'

Cashman says converged infrastructure would facilitate the re-positioning of staff in IT departments. "Before, you had a server team, a network team and a storage team. Ultimately, actually, instead of three people you need one cloud architect who is trained across all three. So there's two jobs released.

"There are two ways of looking at this. You lay the two jobs off, or you retrain say the server administrator as the cloud administrator across the whole piece and the other two people you repurpose above the infrastructure line, up to the application line, to interact with the businesses, understand what they want and then move forward with the businesses. You need cloud people rather than siloed experts. At VCE we are increasingly asking our people to sit across various roles. For example, storage guys broadening around converged infrastructure and also software. We recognise the economics of retraining and we think our customers will too."