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A Leaner Cloud

Puma gains simplicity by trimming back from four providers to one

BY KIM S. NASH

Cloud's ability to ratchet server power and storage up and down as needed suits the demands of online marketing campaigns that tend to gear up and wind down quickly. So a few years ago, sneaker manufacturer Puma ran fast toward adoption.

But soon the $3.6 billion sportswear company found itself dealing with four different cloud providers, each with its own contract terms, pricing and technology options. Puma decided to try to get control of that "large, wild infrastructure" by consolidating clouds, says Jay Basnight, the company's head of digital strategy.

That cloud consolidation projects are starting to emerge shows how entrenched cloud computing has become in the IT landscape, says Chris Harding, director of interoperability at The Open

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Group, a global consortium that leads the development of open, vendor-neutral IT standards and certifications. The problem is that switching clouds isn't as simple as the cloud hype suggests, he says. Applications built for one vendor's cloud may not run well on another's. CIOs have to pay attention to different programming interfaces and architectures.

Dedication Leads the Way

At Puma, four companies—Amazon, Computer Sciences Corp., Rackspace and Slicehost (which is now part of Rackspace)—provided cloud-based services to host various marketing efforts, such as Flash-based websites for online games tied to marketing promotions. Puma launches around 50 sites or apps per year, Basnight says, and the various digital marketing agencies that created them hadn't used the same specifications.

Research and small tests led Puma to Eucalyptus, which offers infrastructure-as-a-service options that give Basnight's staff more control over data and applications, as well as more uniform performance, he says.

Eucalyptus dedicates servers to Puma, rather than spreading the company's data and applications across servers used by other businesses, as is the case at Amazon, he says. That helps make privacy audits easier because he can point to a specific server where data resides. "This allows you peace of mind that you're not sharing infrastructure with anyone else."

Basnight says as Puma migrated applications to Eucalyptus, it saw overall performance improve by 15 to 30 percent, thanks to improved server configurations, among other things. Consolidating clouds also saves "significant" money—as much as 50 percent per hour due to better contract terms and economies of scale.

The consolidation also spurred Puma to simplify how it interacts with its marketing agencies. Before, the agencies would map out applications or websites, coding them all differently and leaving it to Puma and its cloud providers to get them running. Now, Puma hands the agencies guidelines for how to use the single Puma cloud, simplifying development and support, he says.

Harding notes that application programming interfaces and specifications differ from cloud to cloud, which can be an obstacle when trying to move between cloud providers. To take full advantage of cloud computing's promise of dynamic scalability, applications often use a variety of APIs to hook into different systems as the need for computing power goes up and down.

But different cloud providers support different APIs, which may mean an IT group has to rewrite those interfaces. It's not a huge issue, he says, but it's a hidden one.

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