

CHOOSING A GREAT CLOUD PLATFORM:

4 key qualities to look for (*beyond the obvious*)



As more and more organizations realize the value of cloud technology as a fundamental enabler of digital transformation, a key question often emerges:

What makes a good cloud platform?

If we asked you to name the top factors of cloud service robustness, off the top of your head, we bet common sense would lead you to say some combination of:

- Scalability
- Uptime
- High availability
- Speed
- Security

There are cloud services providers who specialize in specific and nuanced aspects of cloud delivery — data centers, Infrastructure as a Service (IaaS) vendors, Platform as a Service (PaaS) vendors, or Software as a Service (SaaS) providers. But whichever vendor space you're exploring, odds are good that they base their value propositions on these five factors.

Your cloud services provider should demonstrate all of these factors in great abundance. In fact, we'll go further: These five elements should be requisite. Table stakes. If a vendor demonstrates a problem with providing anything short of stellar scalability, uptime, availability, speed and security, you should head for the nearest exit immediately.





But just because a cloud services provider ticks these five boxes, it doesn't mean they will — or can — guarantee good service. It's entirely possible to have a horrible experience with a provider in spite of their qualifications.

So, how do you choose a great cloud provider?

In this ebook, we'll talk about the four must-have qualities beyond the requisite elements above:

- A customer-centric culture
- Compatibility
- Stability
- Compliance

These areas might not make the headlines — nor will many providers point them out explicitly — but knowing how to spot them is a solid first step in choosing the right cloud services provider for your organization.

A CUSTOMER-CENTRIC CULTURE

We all recognize good customer service when we experience it, but a positive experience with one representative doesn't tell you the story of the whole organization.

That's because pervasive customer satisfaction-driven services are not a function of individual people. They're a product of a rare company culture that subscribes to a customer-centric services paradigm.

Why rare? It's often all about incentives.

Across the corporate landscape, commissions drive sales teams; utilization rates drive professional services teams; closure rates drive support teams; and everyone is subject to pressure from looming business-wide targets. While this is a significant oversimplification, it serves to illustrate a critical point: Businesses can (and do) exist, function and thrive with incentive frameworks that have nothing to do with customer satisfaction or retention.

It's not a particularly pleasant sentiment, but as a cloud consumer you are a commission, part of a utilization rate, a closure number and a piece of someone's margin.

If you want to be more — perhaps even a valued customer — you'll need to find providers who place emphasis on customer service across the customer lifecycle and above all other incentives. These are the vendors who have reached a level of maturity in understanding the substantial associated benefits and place customer experience at the top of their agenda. These are the vendors to whom you should give your business.



Companies that don't fully subscribe to a customer-centric paradigm might be lucky enough to employ one or two outstanding representatives who go above and beyond to provide excellent customer service. Meanwhile, companies only interested in applying a customer-centric paradigm where it will give them the quickest returns simply drop the concept into Technical Support services.

On the other hand, companies with a pervasive customer-centric paradigm will show signs of it across the entire customer journey.

To spot a customer-centric culture in your cloud services provider, start with the sales representative.

Ask about customer satisfaction numbers within his or her technical support group.

Salespeople are more likely to have this knowledge if they — and everyone they work with — understand the importance of care throughout the customer lifecycle.

Suggest an outlandish development or contractual request.

See if they entertain such suggestions and respond to you with solid explanations as to why or why not the organization can fulfill your request, as well as other workable options to meet your business objectives. This works because a customer-centric paradigm is one that applies respect and empathy to all customers, even those with perhaps unattainable expectations.

Ask specifically about their company culture.

A customer-centric paradigm is an extension of a healthy business environment and a positive employee experience. If they don't have one, they won't want to talk about it.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

Cloud providers with the right mix of internal incentives and a customer-centric culture understand that your success is the key to their success and truly value their customer partnerships. Build your business upon those relationships.

It's also important to keep in mind that you get what you pay for. Making room for a customer-centric lifecycle model comes at a price to your cloud provider. Don't be afraid to invest in someone else's exceptional culture for an exceptional experience.

COMPATIBILITY

There's an old adage for software developers that goes something like this: If you took everyone's suggestions and put them in the product, you would end up with an unusable, unsupportable behemoth. The remedy is, of course, to focus on selected features and functions that cater to the consumer majority.

It's safe to assume that your cloud services provider is doing the same. If you, as a product consumer, let the provided cloud-based tools drive your processes, you may never exit the warm and cozy confines of this "safe" majority ... and you can stop reading now.

If, on the other hand, you like to stretch the limits of the tools you use, you may someday find yourself pulled into the consumer minority: What's known as the "cutting edge." At this point, the tools, software or services you consume may no longer be an airtight fit for your requirements, and the long-term remedies (customization or additional tools) may be costly.

Riding the cutting edge with your processes can also be rewarding, provided you understand this: The further from center you fall, the more you might find your cloud services provider's original assumptions about your business requirements are incorrect. That's why it's so important to find the right provider with the right scalable, flexible platform and a culture that lends a listening ear.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

Know your business processes and understand the only way to get 100 percent of what you want is to build the tools that drive them yourself — or to let the tools drive your business. Since virtually everyone lives somewhere in the middle, ask yourself which way you trend. Keeping this in mind gives you a better shot at maintaining a harmonious relationship with the cloud services you consume.

When looking for a cloud provider, aim for a robust cloud platform out of the gates that delivers somewhere in the 90+ percent range of what you want and provides the opportunity for growth as your needs and requirements change with an eye on the future. Be sure to partner with your cloud provider by keeping a solid feedback loop going.

With the right provider — one that is willing to listen and help you evolve — you can find strategic ways to adapt and expand your solution. You might even be able to turn your "cutting edge" needs into the next round of standard features. The way forward is arm-in-arm, not nose-to-nose.

STABILITY

The technological landscape is in a state of constant refresh. Finding a stable place in cyberspace to pin your processes and services might seem like an insurmountable task. The last thing you want to hear after you sign up for a service is that it's going to change into something you neither need nor desire. Or, worse yet, your vendor is going to cease offering it altogether.

The bad news: You often have limited control over whether this will happen to the services you rely upon.

The good news: A little legal savvy and research can drop these risks down to a reasonable level.

The reality is, all parts of the cloud services spectrum — from advances in hardware to revisions of software and (to a lesser degree) new managed and professional services offerings — are moving targets. It's a safe bet that the version of cloud service you're consuming wasn't around six months ago. Constant change equates to “new,” and “new” sometimes comes with baggage in the cloud world.

Anything “new” has the potential to be simultaneously exciting and filled with risk. Successfully managing the perpetual “newness” of cloud services involves quantifying and, more importantly, addressing this risk.

In this sense, contracts and master services agreements play a crucial role in risk mitigation.

Here are some examples of common risks involved and how you can mitigate them:

The sudden crash or unavailability of the software, service or platform

Make sure you have an uptime/availability SLA in your agreement with the provider

Getting the run-around from support staff

Make sure you have a support response SLA in your agreement

The service could be hacked and your sensitive data stolen

Make sure there are stringent security, access and encryption control requirements detailed in your agreement

THE BOTTOM LINE:

You'll never take the “new” out of cloud services, but you can take the risk out of the “new.” Stability in the sea of change is nothing more than a few well-placed contract clauses.

Write out your fears and what-ifs and pull in your legal counsel to help navigate the muddy waters of the contract world.

COMPLIANCE

If you want to know whether your cloud services provider is actually delivering the software, SLAs, services and security that it says it will: ASK.

The answer should be codified in a contract or evidenced in a third-party report. If not, you may need to do some digging. But even if your provider is forthcoming with the information you ask for, the list of what it actually delivers might be longer than you realize, so fully grasping the ins and outs can be a challenge. Besides, you might miss something in the stacks of contracts, reports and other documents.

In this situation, rely on auditing agencies as your trusted “second set of eyes.” The compliance reports to which they attest — such as SSAE16 SOC I, SOC II and III, PCI and ISO — should be familiar to your provider. A SOC report in-hand goes a long way when it comes time for you to justify the integrity of cloud services to your end users, IT staff, executives and those who are auditing your processes.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

Never be afraid to ask. You need the answers and cloud services providers (the ones who listen to their customers) will appreciate knowing the scope and extent of your compliance requirements.

You should do this diligence before you ink a contract, even if you don't have a current need for compliance with your provider. Most compliance attestation periods span six months or a year. Make it a point to request copies of your provider's reports.

MAKING THE RIGHT CHOICE

The competitive landscape of cloud providers means you have an abundance of choices — many of which will measure up to the scalability, uptime, high availability, speed and security standards you require. In an otherwise flat-value-proposition landscape, there will be significant variation in quality and corresponding hefty costs associated with recovery from failed or short-term provider relationships.

Provided you make the right choices, these costs are avoidable, and that's where it pays dividends to look out for criteria beyond the obvious requisites. These qualities are the hallmark of a mature, proven cloud provider: A customer-centric culture, high compatibility, options for stability and a healthy compliance record.



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