

## Executive Outlook

# The new appetite for infrastructure

## Firms are starved for strong infrastructure leaders as technology catches up to its promise

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For years infrastructure professionals might justifiably have said they were overlooked, undervalued, and potentially even outsourced—the poor relation of the IT function. Infrastructure was critical—sure—but it was seen as a commodity and it was not where IT drove differentiation.

Ever-lower costs was the name of the game, and many businesses settled into long-term monolithic infrastructure deals that drove users mad over worsening service and inflexibility. A career in the world of infrastructure quickly lost its appeal, and top talent drifted toward other areas of the high tech industry.

The tide has turned, however. As large corporations move to recruit executives who can drive the next wave of technology investment, infrastructure leaders have rediscovered their mojo. Suddenly, demand for their expertise has never been higher.

So how did infrastructure become hot again?

In short, the answer is agility and flexibility. Just the things that

many a “ten-year outsourcing deal” killed through low-cost and exhaustive contract terms that tried to define all services in minute detail. “Infrastructure used to be about speeds and feeds, about big iron and even bigger storage. In short, it was ripe for commoditization,” says Ralph Loura, who as chief information officer (CIO) at Clorox brought much of its IT back under internal control. “Now infrastructure is hot due to the de-commoditization that has occurred at both extremes—with engineered systems (Exadata, Vblock, UCS, FlexPod...) on one end and the plethora of on-demand offerings on the other.”

It's not just kids who insist on instant digital delivery of everything anywhere; business users want that too. IT departments are being driven to respond as

never before—whether the need is for real-time information, analytics, business intelligence, big data, cloud solutions, customer systems, or to upscale or downscale the infrastructure to the economic environment.

Fortunately, a number of technology and commercial trends are now maturing at pace and allowing organizations to respond accordingly. None of these technologies is especially new – however they have finally reached a level of maturity. It was ten years ago that IBM announced “On Demand” computing, and other vendors followed suit, talking up utility computing products. In reality, the marketing machines were, as ever, slightly ahead of the curve. Only now is virtualization fully of age, and it is transforming how infrastructure is acquired, managed, used, licensed, and priced. Across the high-tech landscape, cloud-based offerings are providing alternatives to the traditional outsource model – with flexibility and agility now the lynch-pin of the marketing campaign.

And this could be just the beginning: many vendors now talk about the convergence of servers, storage, and networks into a fabric-based infrastructure that will transform IT’s ability to quickly supply new services without massive new investment. Cloud models will continue to evolve, and companies will routinely mix private clouds with public services.

Mark Egan, the CIO at VMware, says it’s up to the infrastructure side to stitch everything together. “In addition to technical skills, what is now required is a broader understanding of business needs and how technology can be deployed to enable new business models. IT professionals need to possess architectural familiarity and must consider the implications of cloud computing, the explosion of social/mobile, and the criticality of communicating effectively in today’s transformational environment.”

Such major changes are not risk free. The drive to cut costs has certainly opened many a CEO or CFO to the idea of shared cloud services where previously they would have proclaimed the need for company-owned assets to protect security. However, the high-profile breaches of the Sony PlayStation Network, the CIA, and other organizations have once again focused minds on the challenges of security.

This new world requires a new infrastructure team – hybrid architects and technologists who can meld emerging technology and services into something that makes sense to the business community; service managers and commercial experts who can ensure that users get what they need and that suppliers are managed professionally. And of course, infrastructure directors who have the technology-savvy to spot opportunities, the commercial sense to get the best deal, and the

business acumen to handle users and senior management, many of whom think they can do it themselves.

It is a fascinating time to work in infrastructure. As we track the executives who are rising to the occasion and exploiting new infrastructure offerings, we are hopeful that such unique skills and capabilities proliferate quickly.

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