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COLUMNS

No matter how strict the security provisions of a cloud provider are, businesses should never make the mistake of thinking they can relax their own cybersecurity efforts

Concerning cloud

NICK HAYNE, THE DATA MASTER

There's no downside to cloud, right? The case for cloud computing has been set out at great length and there's no doubt that utilising its power and convenience – in public, private or hybrid forms – is now mainstream business practice.

However, the counter argument and potential risks specific to the cloud are not so often discussed, despite there being some major pitfalls for the unwary.

Scale can be expensive – cloud offers flexibility and scalability, but it, of course, comes at a cost. When the demand on your systems spikes, rather than slowing down as it did in the past, the cloud expands provision to meet demand. But the meter is running and the additional provision could bring a nasty bill at month's end.

Breach of contract – cloud providers can make use of the data they handle, typically to improve their service – or so their Ts&Cs state. The problem is that the data you're storing is likely to include material from your clients.

And in the world according to the General Data Protection Regulation, it's likely that your customers have their own strict data controls in place. Yet the data storage conditions set out by cloud providers could make it impossible for your customers to work with you and still meet their own data protection rules. Read the small print.

Humans create risk – the sheer amount of data stored on the largest cloud providers makes them an irresistible target for hackers and criminals. Companies like Apple and Google have the resources to invest in the very best cybersecurity, of course, but these systems count for little when the end user is targeted.

Targeting of this kind takes the form of tricks such as phishing emails and fake login pages. The sheer scale of cloud provision means that hackers can launch millions of such phishing attempts while only needing a handful to be successful – they only have to be lucky once.

No matter how strict the security provisions of a cloud provider, businesses should never make the mistake of thinking they can relax their own cybersecurity efforts.

Data flow charges – there are 'hidden' cloud costs, and data transfer is one, which is exacerbated by the cloud's ability to scale up instantly to meet demand. If your website handles queries and the demand suddenly spikes, then when your systems respond to the massive influx of extra queries, extra data flowing from your part of the cloud could trigger a larger-than-normal bill, unrelated to the users on your system.

Keep what you need – the cloud sells on its ability to store massive amounts of data but, just like adding bigger cupboards at home, this means it's easy to fall into the habit of retaining every bit of data you handle. However, indiscriminate storage will create massive and unwieldy blocks of data.

The problem then is that storing data you don't need comes at a cost – which increases imperceptibly, so it's rarely challenged. And, as the volume grows, actually finding what you need within it becomes time and labour-intensive. And data breaches revealing client data become an even bigger risk.

The cloud still offers a huge range of benefits for the average law firm, but now that the rush to join the club has died down, due consideration of some of these 'gotchas' will help with future digital transformation decisions. **LPM**