

Construction in the Clouds

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As construction companies look towards the cloud--cloud computing, that is--many are looking for answers. For instance, what exactly is the cloud and what does it mean for my business moving forward?

Richard Zavali, senior project engineer with general contractor Torcon, www.torcon.com, Red Bank, N.J., addressed this very topic during a session at the Constructech Technology Day event last week. Torcon has been an early adopter of cloud computing for construction, implementing a highly integrated solution through ProjectXnet from The Cram Group, www.thecramgroup.com, New York, N.Y. This includes a Web services platform for construction project management (Converge from Meridian Systems, www.meridiansystems.com, Folsom, Calif.); field technology; and a document management solution.

Addressing the Technology Day audience, Zavali described the cloud as Internet-based computing, whereby shared resources, software, and information are provided to computers and other devices on-demand. Typical cloud service providers deliver common business applications online which are accessed through another Web service or software like a Web browser, while the software and data are stored on servers.

Basic characteristics of a cloud solution, according to Zavali, include: the ability for multiple customers to share hardware or software; the option for customers to pay only for what they use; and the process where providers have service level agreements which result in better cost control and quality of service.

Zavali says the integrated and hosted approach helps increase user adoption by providing project management capabilities in the areas of collaboration, reporting, document management, and field management. The integrated approach allows Torcon to concentrate on construction and still benefit from a centralized repository for data, all while supporting unique work cultures, project management processes, and many users without having to invest in an IT department or extensive training for the system.

The cloud is on the mind of others in the construction industry as well these days. Early last week, Viewpoint Construction Software, www.viewpointcs.com, Portland, Ore., announced a partnership with 3t Systems, www.3t-systems.com, Greenwood Village, Colo., to launch a cloud computing solution for construction.

The companies share a common vision of the benefits the cloud brings to construction, which is that by using a SaaS (software-as-a-service) model via a private cloud, construction companies of any size can leverage the benefits of cloud computing while mitigating common pitfalls such as security breaches, corporate governance, and reliability concerns.

Through this new offering, construction companies can apply cloud computing to provision, access, and manage such systems as project management and operations, cost estimating, project planning and control, and accounting and human resources management.

Going the private cloud concept, according to the companies, achieves a high level of data security and interoperability. Through the development of a customized cloud computing architecture, the companies believe clients will receive more data control and can provide hosted services to a designated number of people behind a secure firewall. It is with that and the advances in virtualization and distributed computing that allow 3t Systems to incorporate the same virtualization and scalability used in larger Internet-based datacenters to the private cloud method.

Overall, cloud computing helps construction companies focus on what they do best--construction--while lessening the burden of deploying and managing IT. In times where cost control is paramount to success, contractors should at least be investigating whether or not such an option would be an ideal fit for their organization.

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