Navigating Public Cloud

Microsoft Azure for the Legal Sector

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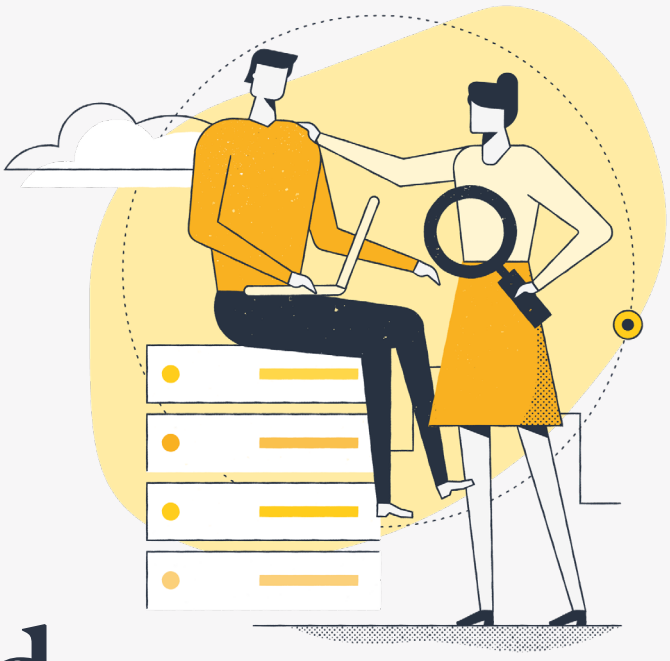


The Rise of Public Cloud

An increasing number of law firms are looking to the cloud to deliver cost-efficiencies and flexibility, with the market becoming increasingly confident with cloud providers' IT security and compliance capabilities.

This shows a marked change in the industry as the cloud market matures and more law firms choose to entrust Microsoft Azure with their client data.

There were long-held concerns about co-locating data in a public cloud – the physical geographic location of the data, including jurisdiction, was a related concern. However, as leading technology providers have poured research and development investment into cloud products, they created controls to address the fears of multi-tenancy.

Public Cloud is now the most identifiable example of cloud computing, where a service provider such as AWS or Microsoft Azure, makes resources such as virtual machines, applications, platform services or storage on a shared platform, available to a public audience via the internet.

It's becoming more commonplace for law firms to utilise Public Cloud services, with Taylor Wessing and Farrer & Co announcing their move to Azure in 2020. But when shifting to a cloud first strategy, it's important for firms to do their research to ensure they fully understand whether a Public, Private or Hybrid approach is the most appropriate solution.

This guide is designed to support law firm leaders with choosing the right cloud strategy for them, by comparing the pros and cons of public and private clouds, exploring each models' suitability for legal sector requirements, and providing guidance on how to get the most out of the cloud.

The Benefits of Azure

Flexibility of Resource and Cost

Public Cloud services are mostly offered on a pay-as-you-go pricing structure meaning organisations can access the resources they need, when they need it, yet only pay for what they use.

The functionality of cloud computing allows for the scalingup and down of resources to match the expected peaks and troughs in workloads. It's easily scalable to meet your IT demands and operates on a pay-as-you-go pricing model to meet any budget. Since businesses can launch internal and external applications in the cloud, it also saves on in-house IT costs, including hardware and maintenance.

Further cost-saving benefits that public cloud offers include zero upfront costs, the ability to streamline and refocus your in-house IT department, accelerating "time to value" by speeding up application release, and reduced energy costs. However, public cloud, such as Azure, can result in being more expensive than first seems due to the fact that certain aspects are not built in, meaning firms can be surprised by the associated costs of building an architecture with high availability, the price of network components, storage, and more.

When considering a cloud solution, building a partnership with an advanced MSP can provide a granular and transparent view of costs. Total cost transparency and an understanding of how flexibility can affect cost and infrastructure requirements will simplify your transition to the cloud.

Before you begin your migration, your MSP should collaborate closely with you to map out your transition and understand your firm's longer-term strategy, working with you to forecast the investment. Firms need to have clarity from their MSP around their ability to scale up and reallocate resources as required.

Full Visibility of Usage

A key factor in overspend is the lack of meaningful analysis tools available to users. Blind spots within the cloud's infrastructure can lead to performance inefficiencies and security risks, as well as uncontrolled costs.

Without analytic tools, law firms are unable to make informed decisions when selecting virtual machine right-sizing or the removal of idle or unused resources. Coupled with price changes and the fact that a firm's data will continue to grow, this lack of operational visibility and data management can mean that costs easily spiral out of control.

Azure offers full visibility to customers on their usage, infrastructure health and performance, by use of tools including centralised logging and activity monitoring, which allows law firms to increase overall efficiency, control resource costs, make strategic business decisions, monitor day-to-day operations, and maintain high levels of security.

Microsoft Azure offers a built-in disaster recovery solution through Azure Site Recovery

Availability and Recovery of Data and Applications

Many believe that Public Cloud services are always on, but Microsoft are no strangers to outages that cause downtime. However, because of its massive presence, Microsoft offers a service-level agreement (SLA) that ensures 99.5% - 99.99% availability, which amounts to less than 4.5 hours of downtime per year.

Microsoft Azure offers a built-in disaster recovery solution through Azure Site Recovery and boasts having the most comprehensive resiliency strategy in the industry, enabling their clients to mitigate rack level and datacentre failures, as well as protection from large-scale events. However, this solution must be built into the architecture and incurs additional, sometimes hidden, costs.

Traditionally, with an on-premise infrastructure, as soon as the in-house IT team discovers an issue, they can act quickly in isolating and resolving the disruption. However, this is not as straightforward when dealing with cloud-based applications, as it generally requires a collaborative effort between the firm's IT department, the internet service provider and the SaaS provider, increasing the mean response time.

Factors to Consider Before Moving to Azure

Suitability for Legal Applications

Most firms will be using several cloud-based applications, from dictation and document management, to Office 365. With every business application, it is important to determine the cloud-readiness of the application and understand the vendor roadmap.

Application readiness will impact the timing of the transition to the cloud. Not all workloads are best suited to public cloud, and some will take longer to move than others. Firms need to ensure they have a long-term roadmap in place to plan the move effectively.

> Does the vendor offer a cloud version today?

> Is it possible to migrate the existing solution to the cloud or is an upgrade required?

Data Residency, Governance and Compliance

More law firms than ever are transitioning to the cloud to host their applications and data. However, although cloud-based solutions pose many advantages, law firms are having to navigate the often-complex realm of data residency, governance and compliance.

Public cloud platforms, such as Azure, are multi-tenanted, meaning the cloud architecture is designed so that firms are sharing computing resources. This means that law firms cannot always be precise around where their data is stored. Clients are increasingly data aware and expect detailed information regarding where their information is stored and how it is protected, so this can have an impact on firms' ability to win clients within heavily regulated sectors.

Law firms based within the UK and throughout Europe must adhere to the rigid laws on where they can store their data. Most Azure services give the customer the ability to select the specific region where data will be stored. With Microsoft Azure owning datacentres within the UK, law firms can ensure that their data is compliant with the required regulations.

It is also essential to consider the legal specific security and compliance implications of a move to the cloud. To ensure compliance with GDPR, ISO 27001 and Cyber Essentials PLUS as well as legal specific requirements of SRA guidelines and LEXCEL, Azure provides built-in compliance tools such as compliance blueprints, configuration management tools and third-party audit reports.

> Briefing magazine (2020) reported that 72% of law firms are seeing an increase in security audits, requested by both existing and new clients, so firms must be able to meet these expectations.

Ability to Control & Customise

An area of concern, for law firms, regarding Public Cloud is that it can lack customisation, or certainly the ability to customise the services to your own exact specification. Service level policies and compliances are enforced by the service provider so it's important to ascertain what these are well in advance before choosing your provider. SaaS platforms simply cannot fit their strict criteria.

You also need to be aware of how the cloud provider takes care of global updates. Microsoft Azure will regularly perform such updates to ensure the reliability, performance and security of host infrastructures is always at peak level for the virtual machines being used within these environments.

Whilst this is great for keeping vital elements up-to-date, virtual machines might reboot without warning. For firms hosting key applications such as their Case or Practice Management software, these non-optional updates could cause major disruption.

When used alongside existing cybersecurity solutions, Azure's built-in security tools can help maintain the privacy, integrity, and availability of sensitive customer information.

In contrast, private cloud offers a high level of customisation. The ideal private cloud provider is one that can offer the ability to tailor your service to supplement the skills of your in-house team, selecting the level of support you require for each individual element of your IT. Additionally, transferring infrastructure responsibility to a third-party means in-house IT department can focus their resources on business value, user adoption and system optimisation projects.

Security Considerations

When it comes to security, law firms are typically reluctant to move to Public Cloud due to the fears of hosting data on a shared infrastructure, and the difficulty in satisfying their clients' questions around that very topic. During the early days, these fears could be justified as the technology was untried, but we are now two decades further on and providers have an enormous amount of experience behind them in ensuring rights management, strong governance and systems monitoring.

All data stored on Azure is protected by an advanced encryption process, and Microsoft's datacentres are equipped with two-tier authentication, proxy card access readers and even biometric scanners. When used alongside existing cybersecurity solutions, Azure's built-in security tools can help maintain the privacy, integrity, and availability of sensitive customer information. With a multi-layered security model, Microsoft helps law firms block data breaches, malware, and other evolving threats.

In contrast, with a private cloud solution, a company's data is kept on their own private infrastructure and protected by a myriad of privately controlled security and ingress/egress controls. This is often the preferred option for those who want greater control, something which law firms have firmly at the top of their agenda given the sensitivity of the data they hold. The software used by law firms also dictates that firms have the ability to customise how data and server infrastructure is managed – a challenge when using public cloud services.

The Best of Both Worlds

Combining a private cloud infrastructure with a public cloud platform brings together the benefits of each, whilst cancelling out the challenges and barriers that each may pose.

For law firms, who rely on robust security and protection of sensitive data, hybrid cloud solutions can offer all the benefits of the cloud without any of the risk. A hybrid cloud platform provides law firms many advantages, including security, compliance, greater flexibility, and more deployment options

When migrating your workloads and applications to the cloud, to ensure they perform well and will be secure, they should be placed in the most suitable environment. Static workloads, such as Practice and Case Management Systems, would be most suited to private cloud due to the level of resource being consistent, whereas AI can be placed in public cloud, with its pay-per-use pricing model, which allows for the scaling down of resources during non-peak times.

It is also important to consider the suitability of your applications. Some widely used Practice and Case Management Systems rely on specific hardware or operating systems that are not cloud-suitable, these applications cannot be hosted within the cloud. Public cloud offers little customisation to accommodate specific tenants, which can act as a barrier to public cloud adoption.

It is recommended that law firms utilise public cloud for general data storage, for items such as emails, spreadsheets and documents, as it offers high enough levels of security.

However, adopting the more robust security aspects of private cloud could mean having mission-critical applications implemented in the private cloud with the less critical workloads being hosted in the public cloud.

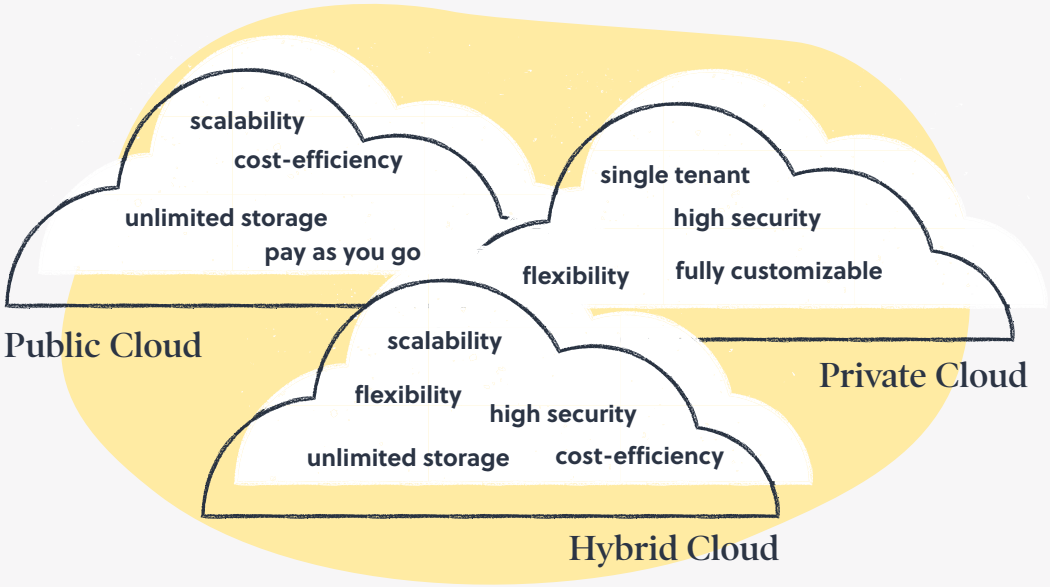
A Hybrid Cloud model can be the most cost-effective solution for law firms who are seeking to become more agile, as it enables them to deploy required resources faster and provides secure and easy application migration. Firms can optimise their costs in areas such as data storage, where they can opt for a combined hot and cold storage system.

All data that you need to be able to access immediately and regularly is placed in hot storage, which has a higher storage cost but lower access cost. On the other hand, cool storage, with lower storage costs but higher access costs, can be used for older content or archived data.

When moving to a Hybrid Cloud strategy, it's imperative that you utilise the services of a specialist IT partner. Dividing your applications and data across a multitude of providers can cause additional work as each one will operate with different SLAs, terms and conditions and technical practices.

A hybrid cloud model requires seamless data transfer between public and private networks, and you must have a complex system in place. Due to the complex nature of hybrid cloud systems, it is advantageous to have a solid IT support team available to organise and manage your environment.

By partnering with CTS, you can receive a seamless link between your public and private cloud environments, with connectivity into Azure built into CTS Cloud.



Summary

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An early stage cloud assessment can be hugely beneficial to identify the correct approach. This would look at the whole span of the firm's infrastructure, software, systems, and processes along with existing investments to create a roadmap that is both cost effective and meets your firm's requirements.

Whether you're just beginning your cloud journey, or looking to optimise and develop your strategy, CTS can help. We are passionate about enabling law firms to work as productively and profitably as possible, acting as your proactive partner to keep your firm ahead as technology evolves. Our Cloud Readiness Assessments are designed to support firms looking at moving to the cloud.

Find out more about our cloud consultancy services.

About CTS

CTS is the only provider of cloud and managed IT services purely dedicated to the UK & Irish legal sector. We work with firms to align their technology with their business strategy, delivering high performance, secure and compliant solutions that enable firms to improve productivity, work flexibly and mitigate risk.

Our deep knowledge of key legal software applications and our partnerships with the leading providers of practice, case and document management software equips us with a unique skillset, combining technological skills and legal sector expertise to configure a firm's IT environment for optimum performance.

Get in touch to find out more about how we can help your firm.

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