



Managing Multiple Companies In the Cloud

How Tom Kelly of T-Edward manages nine companies' key business processes using the cloud.

By Tom Kelly | Apr 26, 2011

I have been in the trenches of both tactical and strategic corporate finance for over 25 years, including being a CFO of a \$2-billion company.

For the past eleven years, I have focused on building on-demand operating environments for client companies, and it became obvious to me early on that cloud applications were the future for businesses of all shapes and sizes. Replicating the power and connectivity of today's modern cloud applications is a full-time job—literally—that can cost a company hundreds of thousands of dollars a year regardless of the company's size.

The single biggest advantage of running nine companies in the cloud is that I can be anywhere and have full access to each client's key processes through nearly any Internet-enabled device. My clients don't need to build out complicated networks and VPNs, and I don't need to juggle nine different laptops to keep data segregated. At the click of a button, I can seamlessly change hats.

The cloud delivers tremendous operating advantages as well. For example, everybody has his or her own interpretation of the old "80/20 rule." In my business, it means about 80 percent of businesses have the same basic needs: sales, service, expenses, payroll, and the like. A business solution that meets close to 80 percent of any company's needs can give me a good, consistent core from which to run that company's financial operations. We found that in [NetSuite](#), which provides world-class ERP functionality, complemented by both sales and service-oriented CRM along with e-commerce capabilities.

I have seen companies waste hundreds of thousands of dollars just to build a brochure-ware website. [NetSuite](#) lets my clients create websites with real-time integration of their corporate data, pay their employees for much less than ADP would charge, and meet their taxation and compliance requirements in virtually any country or currency.

Another obvious application of the "80/20 rule" is office productivity software. Why pay hundreds of dollars extra per seat for Microsoft Office capabilities that at least 80 percent of all users will never need? Standardizing all of my businesses on Google Apps is a no-brainer. We benefit from a top-notch cloud product with strong offline capabilities; robust enough to open virtually any document, spreadsheet, or presentation. We benefit from powerful document sharing and joint editing with no additional software and much lower TCO.

Companies with vast resources can call on expert building managers such as Johnson Controls to manage their properties. My clients tend to be small to mid-sized enterprises and can't afford someone like Johnson, but that doesn't mean they have to go without professional management.

A company called WorkOasis provides property management in the cloud, making it easy for me to specify each company's properties online and quickly book competitive work orders for tasks like broken windows or stuck locks.

Once I commit to a maintenance task on the [WorkOasis](#) website, the company manages the entire process, from fulfillment to verification, and sends me a detailed monthly bill of all services rendered for each site. The accountant in me loves how easy it is to charge the right location for the right job.

Only accountants love accounting. Everybody else hates to be bothered by it, especially when it comes time to file expenses. We use [ExpenseCloud](#), which lets employees file receipts by snapping a photo on their smartphone and submitting directly from their handset. ExpenseCloud provides tight integration with NetSuite's expense management workflow on the backend, automating the entire process. This allows us to pay employees faster, keep everyone happier, and stay 100 percent compliant with IRS regulations.

Many small and mid-sized companies are so caught up in the day-to-day competitive struggle that they have a hard time planning for tomorrow. Until the cloud, truly powerful "what if?" analysis was out of reach for smaller companies.

Adaptive Planning changed all that, making it easy for me to import and export key operating data and projections from NetSuite and build deep, insightful forecasts based on possible trends, like a spike in gas prices. The informative analysis and clear, concise reports are easy to distribute to the key, front-line personnel who can act on those insights, making it easier for them to get out in front of a supply disruption or price fluctuation. We all look like geniuses, and we don't need a research staff of statistics PhDs to get there (apologies to my wife and older brother who are both PhDs).

One of the key benefits of my approach is that the cloud significantly improves IT security for my customers. Instead of needing to hire IT staff to secure sensitive servers and data flows inside the perimeter of the organization, we benefit from the best minds in the industry, engaged by cloud service providers to keep their high-volume data centers safe. Similarly, data flows and shared sign-on between cloud applications are negotiated and secured by the cloud providers themselves, not by some bolt-on product or custom script which may require intensive local IT support just to keep it running, and which cannot be easily audited.

Moving document management to the cloud also improves safety and security. We use [EchoSign](#) to capture signatures on regulatory and compliance forms, such as W-2s and corporate policy acknowledgements. EchoSign gives my corporate clients full compliance, and keeps the forms far safer in the cloud than they would be stuffed in some filing cabinet, susceptible to fire, theft, and plain old disappearance.

I wouldn't dream of trying to run nine companies at once without the cloud. Now that the cloud is here, I wouldn't run even one company any other way.