

business systems, integration

profit, return on investment

Project management, accounts, CRM

Customer records, sales forecasts, pipeline, cashFLOW

James Geldart

Through The Cloud

**Making your business better
in the connected age**

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- ◆ Sir Clive Sinclair, a great British inventor and the man behind the 1980s computers on which I learnt to program.
- ◆ Everyone, individuals and companies, who's ever contributed to the great open source software on which the majority of the internet is built.

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1 INTRODUCTION

What is The Cloud? You've almost certainly heard some reference to The Cloud, Web 2.0 or social media recently. The Cloud represents a new way of storing, processing and sharing information. Although technology firms may say its power lies in its commoditisation of computer resources, its real power is the opportunity to store, access and share data from anywhere using a variety of methods. In business terms, that enables us to work and collaborate in ways that would have seemed impossible until recently.

In 15 short years we've learnt to take for granted that we can phone anyone anywhere in the world whenever we need to. In another 15 years we'll take for granted that we can access all of our personal and business information from wherever we are, using whatever tool we want. The idea of storing important documents on a computer and backing them up to CDs will seem as quaint to our children's generation as typed library card indexes seem to us.

Is this the biggest societal change since the Industrial Revolution that some people are talking about? Well, it's certain that the Information Revolution is already making life unrecognisable to someone from the 60s or 70s; it started with ZX Spectrums and Bill Gates's promise to put a computer on every desk, and is headed to humanity being more connected than ever before. We can now access almost anything we want to know with a few mouse clicks or finger swipes. We can keep up with old school friends with minimal effort, share photos of our children instantly with people on the other side of the world, sell directly to customers in places we've never heard of and tell people about our businesses in ways we're only just beginning to figure out. At the same time, technology is now so user friendly that using it is a lot more about mindset and familiarity than it is

about knowing the difference between HTML and HTTP, just as you don't need to know how fuel injection works to drive a car.

As with any change in society, this is not without its downsides, privacy concerns being one of the biggest (more on those later). But my guess is that since you're reading this you probably agree that the Information Revolution presents huge opportunities not just for businesses to grow, but to do so in a way that can improve the lives of everyone they touch.

So back to the question, what is The Cloud? Well, the Internet Cloud is basically software that runs on server computers 'somewhere', which we access via the web or an app on our smartphone or computer (an app, by the way, is a discreet piece of software that does a specific application, not just something you install on your phone). The whole point is that as an end user I don't need to worry about any of this. Just as when I use my mobile to call my wife, the complexities of the cellular network are irrelevant to me, so when my colleague in the US shares a document with me I don't need to think about where the servers are located, what particular technologies they use and so on.

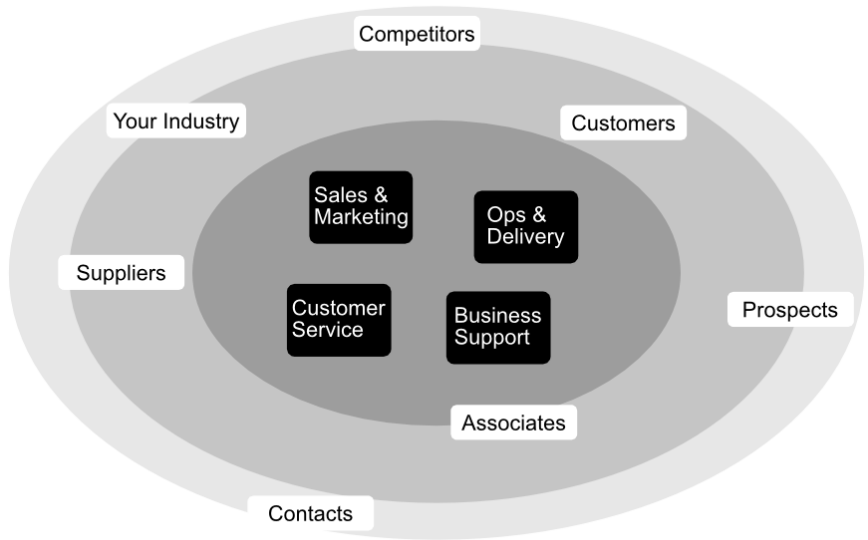
This is a massive shift in how we use computers. I no longer need lots of software installed on my machine, I just need a web browser and an internet connection. The same goes for data. It doesn't matter if I'm using a Mac, a Windows PC, Linux, an iPhone, a Blackberry, an Android phone, an internet tablet, whether I'm in my office, at home, in a hotel, on a beach, on a train... As long as I can get internet access, I have access to everything I need to run my business. What amazing freedom this gives me! I don't have to go to the office to get work done, to raise an invoice, to look at the proposal my colleague's just drafted. I only need to go there to meet people, and even that can often be done virtually. Backups and disaster recovery are pretty much taken care of automatically. And those moments of downtime (train journeys, waiting in the post office queue) can now be productive: checking

email, catching up with contacts on LinkedIn, doing client work, writing a book (this book owes a lot to Dropbox www.dropbox.com). Or I at least get to catch up on TV I've missed and feed my addiction to Angry Birds...

Computing is now commoditised, and a computer moves from being a data processing tool to a communication tool. My belief is that The Cloud is about much more than outsourcing data processing, delivering software in new ways or playing video games on the bus. The Cloud is about people and relationships, and how improved information flow makes them better. It's always been the case that we and our businesses exist within a sea of information, from our dealings with customers, suppliers and associates, to knowledge about others in our industry and even competitors. At the risk of stretching the metaphor, moving through a cloud is much easier than moving through a sea. The technologies of The Cloud allow us to manage our data and interactions, connect with our customers and give our staff the freedom to excel in ways previous generations could only dream of.

YOUR BUSINESS IN THE CLOUD

Before I continue, I'd like to introduce a little diagram. Coming back to my point that businesses exist within a cloud of information, this illustrates some of the key sources of that information. There are three ellipses. The inner one represents your business. The middle one contains people and organisations that your business interacts with directly, and the outer one represents the wider community who may or may not be aware of your business. We'll start to see how information about your organisation flows through all of these areas, and how you can make those flows work to your advantage.



The premise of this book is that we can all improve our business by harnessing new technology to make information flow better and be more useful. I call it becoming information conscious. By becoming an information-conscious business, you can:

- ◆ have highly motivated staff who can use their skills fully and work in a way that suits them
- ◆ have happier customers who get excellent service as you deliver what they expect
- ◆ scale your business because better information leads to better processes
- ◆ understand what is going on in your business because you have the tools to tell you.

My intention is to take you on a journey from a general feeling that you need better systems to some specific plans for what kinds of systems will solve what problems and how to go about putting them in place. There are exercises which are the exact kind of thing I take clients through, and if you do them you should reduce the amount of money you need to spend on external help. Everything in here can be scaled from a two or three person company right up to the procurement process for a large corporation, because the principles do not change.

As I hope you've already realised, this is only partly a book about technology. In fact, I'm not really going to talk much about specific technology for the first half of the book. The most important thing is how people and businesses use information, so we'll start by looking at all the information a typical business contains. Before that, though, a little background about my journey and what brought me to writing this book.

2 BACKGROUND

Who am I to be telling you about The Cloud? Well, I'll start at the beginning.

I was born in East London in 1974 (the year of the amazing Dutch 'total football' side losing the World Cup final, Stephen King's first novel, the first barcode and the launch of Ceefax, arguably the world's first public electronic information system) to an Oxford graduate from a council estate in Bournemouth and a former convent school girl from Sussex. An unremarkable middle-class upbringing ensued, my formative years spent in Bedford, a medium-sized town not close enough to London or Birmingham to be a proper dormitory town and not big enough to be particularly interesting to a teenager with desires to see the world. By way of a degree in Physics with German in Manchester and Berlin, and having taught myself to program on my ZX Spectrum as a kid, I ended up working for a now-defunct American IT consultancy in Amsterdam and later London.

I joined the industry only a couple of years before the dot-com bubble burst, so I was slightly too late to have formed my own company worth £100 million on a Monday and a pound by the Wednesday. Since my employer at the time claimed to be 'building the new economy' (which unfortunately still required revenue to function, much to the surprise of those involved), I got to see plenty of instances where that happened. I worked in the slightly less sexy area of CRM, which for the uninitiated stands for customer relationship management – I promise to avoid any more horrible acronyms in this book! I was lucky in fact, because rather than learn to build pretty websites that did nothing, as the majority seemed to at the time, I got to see first hand over the next five years how technology can help (and unfortunately often hinder) a business. I worked on both the business and technical sides of some interesting projects with medium and

large companies, including a few household names like BT, Commerzbank and Reuters, and led teams through the complete project cycle, which gave me the best grounding in the industry that I could have wished for.

In autumn 2003 I was faced with the prospect of commuting Monday to Friday from London to Madrid, a wonderful city but not such an exciting proposition when you've just got engaged and your fiancée is in London. Feeling a little jaded with the politics of large corporations (BT was the client at the time), I decided to quit my job and start a business offering IT and web services to the small business market.

I quickly saw that traditional desktop or 'client server' software was inflexible and the cause of a lot of the IT headaches small companies are plagued with. I started building (with help from a couple of talented young employees) web-based business software for my clients, and looking at how existing technologies and offerings could be used to help clients operate more effectively.

Along the way, I provided IT and web strategy consulting to amongst others the Institute for Learning as they went from three people in a tiny sub-let office to one of the major players in the UK education and membership sectors.

Through all of this, I've become more and more interested in and passionate about how internet technologies can empower people and businesses, and help them get the most out of the valuable intellectual assets they hold. What has always driven me is my belief that technology and information, when managed properly, can make people's working lives easier and their businesses more successful. It's hugely exciting that the tools to do that are now within reach of everyone.

So, back to The Cloud. It's time to start getting into some of the nitty-gritty, and in the next chapter we'll be looking at information in a business: what

information there is, where it lives and how it flows (or not!). I'll be asking you to complete an exercise at the end of each chapter from now on (asking you to complete one on my background would be a bit much, so you're off the hook for the minute). Feel free to do these in the spaces provided in the book or using our online tool at <http://tools.nuvola.co.uk/>, and I would strongly suggest involving your team in the process. The exercises will help you begin to build a blueprint for bringing the power of 'The Cloud into your business.

To purchase this book, please visit www.nuvola.co.uk/Book