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Dreamforce 2010: 8 Cloud Lessons

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I've been taking in as much of Dreamforce as I can, looking at the attendees, the sessions, and the lessons learned. Here are some flash impressions:

Party Like It's 1999

The show has really rich production values, reminding me of Sun or BEA or Oracle events in the days when conferences were a serious amount of partying. Their opening ceremony had more video tricks than some TV shows. There were way over 100 press and analysts, and the noise level was turned up high enough so Wall Street could hear. But you'll find similar amounts of hoopla from all the cloud vendors because the category is red hot.

Safe Bets

With 10 years and 87,000 customers behind them, Salesforce.com is a safe bet — and not just in the CRM category. They've been increasing the size of their footprint within large customers, moving well beyond single business units or functional organizations. This self-confidence is echoed by all the pure-play cloud vendors, of which there were several dozen on the show floor. Even though some of them are small companies, none of them has to explain why a cloud architecture is OK for business.

A Lot More Foreign Accents

In comparison to previous U.S. shows from cloud vendors, I'm hearing a lot more foreign accents at Dreamforce that I would even in normally polyglot San Francisco. Cloud computing is getting a lot more international use, and not just from end-customers. The Internet has no borders, and a lot more vendors — software and services — are popping up in India, Israel, and Asia. In the cloud, it doesn't matter where your developers work any more than it does where your customers are.

Computer Languages Flourish Too

Since each service in the cloud is effectively operating in its own container, the underlying computer language doesn't matter. While I don't expect to see any cloud developers working in LISP, just about every modern language is in on the action. There's no reason for their to be a winner and the vendors are going out of their way to coax Ruby, Perl, Python, PHP, Java and any big developer community to their platforms.

The Client War: Over Before it Started

Of course, it's still early days. But the client for many cloud apps sure looks to be a personal device — an Android or an iPad — and on those devices there will be dedicated apps. It might be impolitic to point out that this is the rebirth of the thick client, but the screen size and intermittent connectivity of these devices means that the browser will be the less-interesting UI for mobile cloud apps. And practically every cloud vendor is focused on mobility now.

There are a Lot of Options in the Cloud

This is a nice way of saying there are a lot of competing vendors, and little in the way of standardization. This is to be expected when there's a lot of innovation going on along different technology lines — but the cloud does not appear to be a replay of the client-server standard wars. I only see one area of standardization: pricing models. The languages, development models, and capabilities of each competing cloud vendor are quite different. Which leads to...

Integration is Front-and-Center

As long as you stick with one vendor, the clouds are pre-integrated. But it's pretty clear that there will be at least a couple of cloud vendors in each major product/service category, so integration is essential to achieving business value. In the cloud, everything is a Web service. So SOAP and RESTful APIs take care of everything, right? Uh-huh. Integration vendors are scrambling to optimize their offerings for cloud integration, even if their products are deployed on-prem. One smart thing vendors like Snap Logic, Jitterbit, Pervasive, and Boomi have done is to create great UIs for their systems to make it look easy. But face it: it's still programming.

There are a Whole Lot of Clouds Out There

Salesforce is announcing two new clouds today. They already have six offerings, so it's getting hard to keep track of them all. Other vendors don't have the headstart that Salesforce has, but I'd expect others to be broadening their cloud lines in the coming months. The marketing noise is going to get confusing...but I also anticipate a lot of M&A in the coming months. The best products will survive, but they'll be owned by bigger companies (witness Dell's purchase of Boomi).

David Taber is the author of the new Prentice Hall book, "Salesforce.com Secrets of Success" and is the CEO of SalesLogistix, a certified Salesforce.com consultancy focused on business process improvement through use of CRM systems. SalesLogistix clients are in North America, Europe, Israel, and India, and David has over 25 years experience in high tech, including 10 years at the VP level or above.

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