ConversationalGeek

Conversational
Cloud Backups for MSPs

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2nd MINI Edition

Learn about:

- The opportunity cloud-based backups provides to MSPs
- What your cloud backup storage options are and how to choose the right one

Conversational Cloud Backups for MSPs (Mini Edition)

by Nick Cavalancia

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The “Conversational” Method

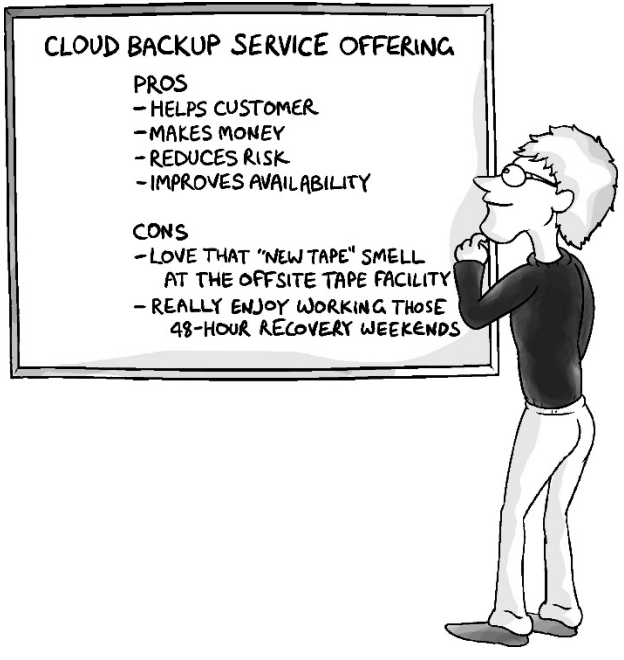
We have two objectives when we create a “Conversational” book. First, to make sure it’s written in a conversational tone so that it’s fun and easy to read. Second, to make sure you, the reader, can immediately take what you read and include it into your own conversations (personal or business-focused) with confidence.

“Geek in the Mirror” Boxes

We infuse humor and insight into our books through both cartoons and light banter from the author. When you see one of these boxes it’s the author stepping outside the dialog to speak directly to you. It might be an anecdote; it might be a personal experience.

Within these boxes I can share just about anything on the subject at hand Read ’em!

The Opportunity of Cloud Backup



Most MSPs today recognize the need to move well beyond just remote monitoring and management as their source of recurring revenue. Advancements in the cloud and in software have made it possible

for MSPs to offer a wide range of services, often at levels rivaling that of enterprise-caliber offerings.

Organizations of all sizes have come to realize the importance of ensuring your business is resilient to even the most remotely possible disruption. They've also experienced the need to evolve their use of the cloud to accommodate the shift to a remote workforce – whether by hosting on-premises applications within the cloud, or by moving to new cloud-based services. Lastly, the need to protect the systems, applications, and data that now live in the cloud is now evident as well to maintain operations.

Backup services is an area where the playing field is leveled; cloud vendors provide the same storage offering to companies both big and small, with backup software vendors doing the same thing. We're no longer living in a world where it's a struggle to find cost-effective storage even the smallest customers can afford; nor are you still hoping for some enterprise backup vendor to come out with an "MSP Edition" of their software.

Some MSPs have chosen to go the route of an on-prem backup offering, simply to tick the checkbox for "backups" for their customers. But those who are serious about providing recoverability closely follow cloud evolution, the industry trend to provide business resiliency, and use the cloud as part of their cloud backup offering.

Why Cloud-Based Backups?

I'm going to assume that nearly every one of you hasn't been hiding under a rock and gets the value of the cloud – even if cloud backup is new to you. Even so, it's important to cover the "why" of cloud backups. While plenty of on-prem backup solutions are still being created in this day and age, the use of the cloud, for these purposes, makes more sense for MSPs for a number of reasons:

1) **Simplicity** – When you consider how all your customers have varying ways to operate (e.g., where they host their applications, which applications they use, how they utilize cloud services, etc.), having a cloud-based backup solution (that still supports on-prem backups)

placed you in an advantageous position where you are able to provide the needed protection from a single solution.

2) **Better Profitability** – Predictability breeds profitability. At the end of the day, you want a profitable service offering. The basis of the cloud is to provide a cost-effective and reliable set of services (whatever they may be). In the case of cloud backups, the result of the previous four reasons is a more profitable service offering.

3) **Better Protection** – The cloud gives you many more storage options than on-prem around how, where, and when your backups are stored – all of which impact your ability to recover. That's a recipe for providing much better protection of your customers' data and operations. And with the cloud offering as many as 16 (yes, 16!) nines of data durability, you know your data is in-tact and ready for recovery.

4) **Better Pricing** – On-prem backups tend to involve costly hardware, requiring either a hefty customer investment, or you carrying the burden of the expense while offering affordable pricing to your customer. Cloud backup does away with all that, making it easy to incorporate the cost of cloud resources into your pricing model.

5) **Better Positioning** – Your ability to deliver a quality service depends on your capacity to monitor and manage backups, as well as to address recovery needs. The cloud puts you in the driver's seat for every one of your customers, no matter where they – or you – are.

6) **Better Predictability** – You need to be able to count on your backup infrastructure to meet your customers' availability, accessibility, scalability, and affordability requirements. The cloud does this, delivering better performance, elasticity, and cost than an on-prem solution.

Some of you might be wondering "*What about hybrid-cloud backups?*" It's a valid option, but with advances, in recent years, in compression and deduplication (as well as cloud recovery options for replication and restore within single-digit minutes), many organizations are focusing on using solely the cloud.

It just makes sense that, as an MSP looking to offer backups, you leverage the cloud. The challenge with this is that there are so many cloud providers vying for your business, it's confusing to decide which to use.

What Should You Be Backing Up?

MSPs should be thinking about protecting as much of the customer's environment as possible. The modern MSP is focused on backing up the following:

- Everything Still On-Premises – This includes any servers, services, applications, and data that still reside within the four walls of the customer.

- Anything Moved to the Cloud – Should there be some systems that are now virtually hosted by a cloud provider, they need to be protected.

- SaaS Application Data – Most providers of cloud applications, such as Microsoft 365, don't see backups of your customer's data as their responsibility. Providing there is an API and a supporting backup solution, any operational data in a cloud application should be included.

Keep in mind where your customer's operations exists is going to be shifting over the next few years as well; the pandemic has given even the smallest business a taste of why they need to embrace the cloud, which will no doubt be the catalyst for more shifting to cloud-based services in the future. It's one of the most important reasons you should be thinking about cloud-based backups today. But with so many cloud vendors, where should you start?

Which Cloud *Should* You Use?

There are plenty of vendors from which to choose; and all of them offer accessible storage from a variety of backup vendors. So, *how do you pick?*

In this section, I'll walk through some of the major players you can leverage, discussing some of the storage-centric features of each. In the next section, I'll discuss some factors to consider, which may help you differentiate your options.

Amazon, Microsoft, and Google… Oh My!

I'm grouping all three of these mega-cloud vendors in the same bucket. Amazon S3, Microsoft Azure, and Google Cloud are deep in competition with one another, with so much alignment in their storage offerings that it makes more sense to cover them as one. All three of these vendors provide multiple storage tiers to meet varying needs for retention, retrieval, and cost.

These vendors also mimic each other with regard to data transfer fees, when taking data out of their respective platform or transferring it to another location/region/etc. within their platform.

The one real benefit to these vendors is the availability of virtual infrastructure to use for recovery, should your customer experience a complete loss of location and/or operations.

You can find a deeper comparison of the "big 3" cloud providers from a backup perspective at

http://bit.ly/CloudBackupComparison.

Backblaze B2

This cloud vendor is bucking the system (*dare I say "blazing" their own trail?*) by simplifying everything about cloud storage and boiling it down to an uncomplicated single tier of storage with an equally-easy and predictable pricing model that undercuts the big guys. While there's no virtual infrastructure offered to recover to, Backblaze offers a service where you can receive a copy of your data by mail.

Wasabi

These guys resemble Backblaze, with a single-tier storage model that has an even simpler pricing model (GB/month). That's it; no egress fees, no API usage costs.

As a former MSP, I love the simplified pricing from Backblaze B2 and Wasabi. But, depending on your customers' archive needs (and retrieval frequency), Amazon S3 Glacier, Azure Archive Storage, and Google Coldline could be cost-effective options, specifically for archive data.

Comparing Your Cloud Options

Every one of these vendors supports a wide range of backup solution vendors, making them each a viable option for your cloud backup needs. I've created a high-level table (*on the next page*) to summarize these potential storage partners.

How Should You Choose?

The vendor that fits the bill for the cloud storage aspect of your cloud backup offering will depend on the scope of your service offering, the needs of your customers, and several other factors:

	Amazon S3	Microsoft Azure	Google Cloud	Backblaze B2	Wasabi
STORAGE TIERS	6	3	4	1	1
COLDER TIER RETENTION MINIMUMS?	30-180 Days	30-180 Days	30-365 Days	None	30-90 Days
DATA TRANSFER COSTS?	Egress, Regional	Egress, Regional	Egress, b/t locations	Minimal	None
STORAGE MANAGEMENT?	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A
CLOUD RECOVERY?	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No

Cost

Even when there are vendors out there using the easiest of pricing models, it's not always as simple as a cost/GB. Often, the *real* monthly costs you'll be paying – while not hidden – aren't entirely defined up front. As is appropriate for a given cloud storage vendor, you need to calculate the cost, which may include one or more of the following components:

- Storage Used – OK, this one's sort of a given, but should be mentioned. Every vendor starts with a base cost/GB model.
- Storage Tiers – The mega-cloud vendors offer multiple tiers of storage – the colder the tier, the lower cost/GB, but also the slower the retrieval and recovery. Backblaze and Wasabi offset this by differentiating on the base cost/GB.
- Retention Requirements – Colder tiers come with a minimum storage duration (that's the minimum cost to host a given set of data there). It's to keep you from using a tier designed for Archive (which

would be materially cheaper when storing TBs of data) for a short period of time, for example.

- Data Ingress/Egress – Storage vendors generally want to keep you. So, they put what I affectionately call "suck factor" into their offering. For most vendors, you need to pay a fee (calculated as a cost/GB) to take data outside of their ecosystem, or to a disparate part of their environment.
- Data Management – Some vendors also charge for creating, listing, and deleting either storage buckets/containers or data itself. This is often priced either on a cost/GB or cost/request basis.

Manageability

For customers whom you have on one of the mega-clouds that employ some serious storage requirements over a long period of time, you want to be able to provide them with an automated ability to move older backups and data sets to

colder storage tiers, automatically, via policies. This reduces the cost of storage over time, while still making it accessible in the event it becomes absolutely necessary to recover.

Recovery Functionality

You need to be thinking beyond just storage when selecting a vendor. You already know that the name of the game isn't backups; *it's recovery*. So, having an ability to recover in the same cloud as your data establishes resiliency, and does so with the lowest cost possible (because you'll have successfully avoided egress charges).

If your service offering doesn't focus on recovery, this isn't an issue. But if you want also to recover your customers' environments, it's helpful to have a plan to do so in the same cloud where you keep backups.

Don't just settle for offering backups. Even novices should get into the recovery game. Pressures put on businesses to be resilient means they may pass on you *because* you don't offer recovery. Consider offering free recovery and testing to one customer, just to have a real-world use case.

Your Choice Impacts Your Offering

If you've spent any time devising a new service offering, you already know that the definition of your service model influences much more than just the cost of your cloud storage and the backup solution used.

Your choice of cloud backup storage will have a ripple effect in many ways:

- Service Definitions – You can only offer what you can deliver. So, if you pick a cloud storage vendor that offers virtual infrastructure, adding disaster recovery as, at least, an optional component is possible.

- Pricing – Looking beyond *higher* pricing, you may end up with *more complicated* pricing, depending on your choices; this tends to turn off customers. And if your backup solution of choice requires lengthy contracts, this issue is only exacerbated.

- SLAs – Your ability to quickly respond will depend on the tiers of storage used (some even measure "first byte latency" values in *hours*), and, if recovery is included, the presence of virtual infrastructure will accelerate the recovery process.

Do You Need to Choose Just One?

I saved the million-dollar question for last. The short answer is a resounding "no." In fact, I'd probably recommend against it. Unless you have a very homogenous customer-base, customer needs are going to vary wildly. Some will just want a backup of their data (with no desire to plan for recovery), while others want a comprehensive recovery strategy in place.

You should review the features and benefits of each cloud storage vendor, aligning each one to meet specific customer needs as the vendor of choice. You should also consider if some parts of your customer's operations reside in the cloud already,

keeping the data within that provider will be a less-costly option.

This does assume that you have a single backup solution that integrates with all of the cloud storage vendors you choose to do business with. Most MSP-centric backup vendors are keenly aware of this and have already taken great strides to facilitate the use of multiple clouds for storage and recovery.

I'd suggest determining which cloud(s) meet(s) your customer needs and, then, find a solution that already plays well with those cloud vendors.

Cloud backups offers MSPs the opportunity to add on a needed and profitable service. But with so many cloud storage options, it's tough to know which one is going to give you what you need at a reasonable cost. In this book, I'll cover why you need to offer cloud backup and how to pick the right storage.

About Nick Cavalancia

Nick Cavalancia is a Microsoft MVP, a Technical Evangelist by trade, and is a 25+ year IT veteran who regularly speaks and writes for some of today's most recognizable companies.