

What's your hybrid cloud strategy—data-first or cloud-first?

Turn data into real-time actionable insights for smarter decision-making



For years, business transformations started by moving workloads and applications to the cloud in a lift-and-shift approach. Adopting a cloud-first strategy in this fashion let organizations operate elastically and efficiently, helping them move faster, automate functions, scale resources to meet needs, and strengthen the overall business.

While creating cloud environments is often still top of mind, many transformation discussions have taken the necessary next step. Progressive organizations have evolved to consider how to better use a previously underutilized resource—data.

Data-driven insights can generate value in many ways. By adopting a data-first approach, organizations are finding that they can make better decisions around operational models, improve the customer experience, and drive more revenue to the bottom line.



Defining data-first

Studies show 83% of CEOs want their organizations to be more data driven.¹ But simply doing more with data and making data a defining element in the overall corporate strategy are two different things.

What is a data-first approach? While IT scholars define the term differently, it's generally thought of as a strategy that orients every aspect of your organization to maximize its use of data. In a data-first organization, data is no longer an afterthought, and it must evolve (beyond traditional and inflexible architectures, infrastructures, and operating models) to provide positive business outcomes. Now, savvy organizations know that to succeed, they need the insights data generates, and they're making sure they apply the right resources to cultivate, manage, and analyze that data.

The two approaches—cloud-first and data-first—are compatible, but you need to revise your overall operating model as you prioritize doing more with data. The question of how to optimize this model is one that businesses are wrestling with as they push to compete more effectively.

The big challenge with data is that it is everywhere. It's inside applications, databases, core systems, mobile devices, the public cloud, and private clouds, as well as out on the edge. It's being pulled in from third-party resources and it's constantly in flux, moving from one place to another. This flow requires organizations to approach data in a holistic, systematic way. Real-time data also means that real-time data analytics becomes more important. Hence, businesses must create environments where they can control data flow, make it more readily available, and protect and utilize it where, when, and how it's needed.

The bottom line is that data needs to be seen as a defining element in the company's overall business model.

Breaking down data silos

Your organization's success at becoming data-first depends on its overall maturity across strategic capability domains, including governance, innovation, people, security, operations, DevOps, applications, and data. But data is more than just a component in a business model. For a model to advance in today's data-focused markets, it must become a catalyst for innovative thinking.

For example, consider how governance is handled. Since data provides nuanced levels of value to different parts of the organization, its ownership and stewardship must evolve for better collaboration. Data-first thinking involves efforts to do more than just protect data and regulate it. Your governance policies must promote and enable the strategic sharing of data with partners, customers, members of supply chains, and in certain cases, the public. If governance is too strict, organizations will miss opportunities. If it's too lax, they'll expose themselves to greater risk. Based on context, sharing data in a controlled, fit-for-purpose fashion becomes a more realistic opportunity.

Breaking down silos that keep data from being shared opens new opportunities. If a product development team is not privy to users' negative reviews, it will miss the chance to add innovative features, correct flaws, or enter entirely new markets. Data-first tactics can also unearth information on competitors' business practices, market strengths, and user preferences, influencing merger and acquisition tactics and other business decisions.

¹ "What do data-driven companies have in common?", tableau.com, July 2021

Data should guide workforce decisions as well. Employees must be empowered to use that data for a data-first strategy to work. Are developers able to access documentation that helps them build better software? Are line-of-business managers and product marketing leaders making decisions based on the same high-quality, up-to-date datasets? Are the right tools for data access available to those who need it, where they need it?

Looking across these domains unearths a long list of questions organizations should answer as they move to a data-first approach:

1. How siloed is our data, and why do those silos exist?
2. Can our current technology stack work with our data-first needs?
3. How are we handling the processes for how data is consumed?
4. Is our current data strategy promoting innovation?
5. Are applications leveraging data effectively?
6. Can we use data to drive innovation?
7. Is innovation a goal or a hurdle?
8. Have we defined our data-first approach to make it fit our business needs?

At its core, developing a data-first strategy starts with a basic question: Does your data give you a competitive advantage? If it doesn't, why not? Based on the answer to this question, an organization can develop strategies to optimize how data can help it compete.

The backbone of business transformation

Cloud-first and data-first approaches are quite compatible—they're separate but complementary functions that serve business transformation interests.

A cloud-first approach is less about where to put information and more about making sure systems and applications operate in an agile manner. Information can be anywhere—in the cloud, in the data center, or out on the edge—but it must flow in and out of an environment that acts like a cloud. Data-first extends the concept to take that newfound flexibility so you can use it more strategically.

Once an organization successfully adopts a cloud-first model, it can shift its focus to letting data become the primary business driver, enabling it to achieve its ultimate transformational goal: positive business outcomes.

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