

PARTNER'S GUIDE TO Starter Workloads in Azure



Microsoft's flagship public cloud platform has major architectural differences from on-premises infrastructure, but a half dozen business scenarios for MSPs and ISVs make Azure worth a serious look. **By Scott Bekker**

LET'S FACE IT, the flexibility of Microsoft Azure is intimidating.

It's among the reasons most Microsoft partners aren't building their business on Microsoft's flagship public cloud platform.

The attractions for Azure are clear. When Microsoft talks about the \$4.5 trillion digital transformation opportunity (an IDC figure) over the next few years, that's largely an Azure discussion.

Microsoft moved to encourage partners to its public cloud last year with a detailed "Azure Managed Services Playbook for CSP Partners." The 57-page document covers business models, technical details of Azure and steps for building a practice. The detail is great, but the length and commitment can be overwhelming. There

are so many Azure services, covering so many current and emerging technologies, that the possibilities are limitless. And paralyzing.

Smaller Microsoft partners with a more sales-oriented operation and a small technical support staff can be put off by the choices and commitments, even when they recognize that Azure is the North Star that Microsoft is pointing itself and its ecosystem toward.

In a recent RCP Partner Guide, we tackled this issue from the programmatic side. (See "MSP's Guide to Getting Started with Azure," May 2018.) In that report, we suggested several steps for ramping up on Azure knowledge by leveraging Microsoft's copious free materials or resources that come with certain membership levels.



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Key steps included:

- * Signing up for the rich Microsoft Partner Network (MPN), where even the free tiers offer substantial training resources.
- * Leveraging any available Internal Use Rights (IURs) at the paid MPN tiers to gain hands-on familiarity with Azure. IURs include \$100 worth of Azure usage per month, with more available for partners who earn the Cloud Platform or ISV competencies.
- * Gaining familiarity with a few core services relative to managed services providers (MSPs), rather than trying to digest the entire stack of hundreds of available Azure services at once.
- * Mapping skills of current staff to related areas in Azure, where those technical employees will have a head start.

In this guide, we’ll look at the issue from the opportunity side. For smaller partners with less technical expertise and less free time to ramp up technical skills, there are some opportunities to leverage third-party tools and platforms that automate putting customers’ environments up on Azure. Those tools can move a company’s network into the cloud, virtualize Windows applications, provide easy-to-use cloud infrastructure management tools, and guide partners through cost optimization and consumption minimization.

Taking that approach leads to six “starter workloads” in the Azure cloud.

1. LEGACY APPS

A lot of businesses are moving to an operational expense mindset when it comes to information technology. They’re using Office 365, which in addition to being a front-end way to subscribe to Office desktop applications, also means that they’re able to replace Exchange servers, SharePoint servers and some file servers in favor of cloud-based services. Similarly, they’re looking to Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) applications for many of their other functions—perhaps customer relationship management with Salesforce.com, marketing with Marketo, team collaboration with Slack and many, many others. One recent survey found that the average organization subscribes to 18 different SaaS services, with many of those purchasing decisions made outside the IT department.

Yet there’s a class of applications that stubbornly refuses to be SaaS-ified. It’s those line-of-business applications and other legacy

applications that are still causing lights to blink in an ever-shrinking server room. One clear use for Azure is to put those applications in the cloud, where they can be managed like other cloud-based services and subscriptions. That kind of a move reduces spending on hardware upgrades and maintenance, electricity and hands-on administration of software. At the same time, it brings the legacy application out of the capital expenditure category and in line with the operational expenditures that are becoming the norm for the rest of a customer’s technology budget.

2. DESKTOPS FROM THE CLOUD

From a management and security standpoint, it’s incredibly helpful for organizations to have a standardized desktop. Yet there are other forces at play, and those have been making inroads over the last few years. Organizations aren’t conducting as many standardized upgrades of OSes, the massive migration projects from, say, Windows XP to Windows 7 of years past. And it’s not just because of Windows 10, and the always-current features of Microsoft’s latest OS, although that contributes to the phenomenon. This development can lead to a big mix of desktop OSes in organizations, with systems replaced on an as-needed basis.

Arguably the bigger factor is the bring-your-own-device (BYOD) trend and mindset. Users expect to be able to work on the devices they prefer and at the time and place that they need to, again regardless of the device in front of them. That puts enormous pressure on IT departments or the MSPs who provide IT for customers.

A key way to bring those desktops back under control without losing the flexibility that’s critical to current businesses is by delivering desktops through the cloud. Organizations running Remote Desktop Services via an Azure Infrastructure-as-a-Service (IaaS) model, can push out standardized desktop applications to all sorts of devices. The approach secures corporate data and leaves end users with the autonomy that helps them be most productive.

3. RUNNING AN ENTIRE SMALL BUSINESS

Combining applications and desktops in the cloud can be a home run for smaller businesses. Get much greater than 50 to 100 users and most organizations will often have a number of compelling

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reasons to run important portions of their infrastructure on-premises. But for the smallest companies, going to a nearly 100 percent cloud approach can be very appealing.

When the only capital expenditures are for any non-BYOD devices that need to be supplied, everything in the IT budget can switch over to a monthly bill. And some partners are providing even devices on a pay-as-you-go approach, with Microsoft rumored to be taking a serious look at that business model, as well. Using third-party software to get the remaining elements of a small business—from apps to desktops—up onto Azure is a strong area of opportunity for small business-focused MSPs in the Microsoft ecosystem.

4. SECURING A BUSINESS

Even for larger businesses, moving the entire infrastructure onto a cloud platform can be appealing if the company has reason to be concerned about security. For a long time, one of the knocks on Azure and other cloud platforms was security.

Unfamiliarity with the cloud in general and a feeling that the mega-vendors offering public cloud were relatively untested on security were major reasons not to consider the approach. With time, those concerns are easing and some of the initial promise of the public cloud is proving true. For example, when using Azure cloud, customers are benefitting from a platform managed by world-class security architects. At the same time, those architects are working at a scale, and with sophisticated tools and processes that small to midsize businesses can never match.

5. OFFERING COMPLIANCE

A similar concern is organizations with compliance requirements. Turning to an Azure-first approach can be a good fit for MSPs who address heavily regulated verticals. Doctor offices, financial companies, legal firms, companies that do business in Europe, organizations that work with governments and others could all benefit from whole-infrastructure solutions built on Azure.

The Microsoft TrustCenter lists dozens of regulatory standards in the United States and internationally with which the Azure platform works. In many cases, MSPs and other Microsoft partners are finding that it makes more sense to build a solution on Azure

than to try to meet compliance requirements through more traditional means.

6. ISV APPS: GETTING TO SAAS

The use cases here are largely aimed at MSPs and their business models. Switching gears, another group of Microsoft partners can benefit from a quick migration to Azure. Many independent software vendors (ISVs) have built a strong business on a Windows application. Many of the same benefits that accrue to organizations that move their legacy applications in the cloud also apply to ISVs looking to expand their business model by turning their on-premises application into a SaaS product. By putting the application into the cloud, an ISV can take upgrades and management of underlying software platforms and hardware out of the equation. Similarly, an Azure-based application can handle increases in customer demand when, and only when, they happen, minimizing the cost of underutilized capacity in anticipation of sales.

ISVs also face the same complex questions as customers. Looking at the Gartner Inc. model for moving applications to the cloud, do they rehost, refactor, revise, rebuild or replace? And with those models, do they go with an IaaS or Platform-as-a-Service (PaaS) approach for the back-end infrastructure supporting the new SaaS model? Using a third-party platform to outsource the technical delivery of the application to Azure can remove huge obstacles to the project of turning an application into a new SaaS line of business.

For Microsoft, the Azure platform is the main strategic engine for revenue growth as the \$110-billion-a-year company seeks new markets. Partners know that to go along for the ride, it's critical to get involved with Azure, which grew revenues at 89 percent in Microsoft's most recent financial quarter. While the technical challenges to Azure can be high, there are relatively less complex ways to get involved with key starter workloads. And once a partner gets started with Azure, it's easier to build expertise and branch out on the ever-evolving platform into new or more involved business scenarios. •

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