TCBC Spotlight

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ThinkOn: Bringing IaaS to the mid-sized enterprise

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ThinkOn: bringing IaaS to the mid-sized enterprise

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ThinkOn was founded in 2013 as Canada's only wholesaler provider of virtual data centre, storage, compute and networking (infrastructure-as-a-service) services. Its focus is on helping mid-sized enterprises protect and leverage their data assets and optimize their application infrastructure costs. Key end user markets for ThinkOn include the financial, manufacturing and the public sector.

The company partners with established brand name infrastructure providers such as Hitachi, HP, VMware, Microsoft, CommVault and Veeam to offer a full infrastructure-as-a-service stack. Services are delivered through a national network of 15 channel partners, including Scalar, Compugen and Arrow. This channel-only model allows enterprise customers to access cost effective, secure and scalable virtual resources, while continuing to work with their managed service provider of choice.

ThinkOn's repertoire of outcome-centric services are designed to help customers understand the meaningful things they can accomplish by leveraging cloud economics and operational efficiencies. The company achieves this by providing a secure, fast and scalable way for customers to host enterprise applications, big data analytics and disaster recovery-as-a-service.

Company name: ThinkOn

Number of employees: 19

Headquarter and Other Locations: Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver .

Primary cloud offerings: Disaster recovery-as-a-service and Big Data applications

Key business challenges: Disaster recovery delays, content relevance, compliance complexity

Examples of current customers: sells through 15 channel partners, including Scalar, Compugen, Arrow and others

Some of the most recognized services provided by ThinkOn include Endpoint Protect, an integrated single-platform backup, data loss prevention and analytics solution for distributed workforce applications; Veeam Cloud Connect, a data protection solution; and Edgeconnect, a hybrid cloud strategy solution.

A significant revenue area for ThinkOn is replacing tape storage, where there is ample opportunity for growth, according to Craig McLellan, ThinkOn founder and CEO. Another is delivering the foundations that allow customers to collect and manage large data volumes for compliance or other data-related functions.

Business challenges: closing the gap on disaster recovery time

The main challenge for mid-size enterprise customers is disaster recovery lag times – an issue that is well served by a cloud-based infrastructure service, McLellan said. "Every organization has at least one if not two apps that need to be running within minutes of a disaster. You can't accomplish that with traditional disaster recovery solutions because they're either too expensive or simply can't be done. Cloud services can dramatically accelerate recovery capabilities."

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A second major challenge for customers is the preponderance of content that is not searchable, indexable or found quickly because it exists in either paper or tape format. "One role of the cloud service we offer is turning that content into meaningful data so companies can derive value from it," McLellan said.

A third and very significant challenge organizations face today is the increasing scope and complexity of compliance requirements that is building across multiple industries. "The bottom line is compliance is becoming more and more of a concern," he said. "Organizations must have the ability to quickly understand where their posture is in terms of their own compliance, because there is simply no margin for error. A cloud solution can help with that."

Best practices (internal): building on a cloud model to deliver cloud services

Craig McLellan, founder and CEO, ThinkOn

ThinkOn's own internal operations run on a cloud-based infrastructure. "We do eat our own dog food, as they say," McLellan said. "Because of that, we have to be 100 percent confident in being able to deliver high level availability. When you can show customers you have done it yourself, it's meaningful to them. They trust in using you for their own infrastructure."

He cites two key best practices that are integral to ThinkOn's capacity to deliver services. The first is leveraging the company's own capabilities to ensure compliance with the regulations it has to support – whatever the industry or geography that is being served. "Our compliance capabilities always trickle down from our customers. We have to be conscious of all their constraints and/or opportunities."

A second key element for ThinkOn's delivery model is "erring on the side of simplicity" in order to deliver a seamless cloud experience throughout the entire customer lifecycle, from initial quotes and setup to invoicing. To that end, the company takes pride in offering a service delivery infrastructure that is very simple and easy to understand and manage.

"We don't chase shiny objects. Just because something new is available it doesn't mean it has a place in our networks," McLellan said. "Because of that, vendors know we are a great place for them to get technology deployed because we don't attempt to do more with it than is absolutely necessary. Once you start adding trinkets to an infrastructure, you're in trouble as soon as something breaks. And in this industry, it's not a question of *if* it will break, but *when*."

Best practices (delivered to external clients): bringing control, stability and familiarity to the cloud

ThinkOn does not pursue the shared infrastructure, self-service market, since it is nomadic and workloads are unpredictable. "When you offer self-service capabilities, there is no way of controlling what your tenant will need and workload becomes choppy and inconsistent, which is not conducive to enterprise operations," McLellan said.

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In a majority of customer cases, the workload is brownfield (i.e. started somewhere else) and simply waiting for deployment in the cloud on a long-term basis. McLellan contrasted this with startups that can come and go. That stability helps to minimize the need for, and the cost of, moving large portions of data in and out of cloud services for enterprise clients.

In addition to providing consistency and stability, ThinkOn ensures that customers are never bound by having only one copy of their data, as it is always copied and available off site within Canadian boundaries.

In addition, ThinkOn's services are delivered on platforms that are familiar to customers. Over 90 percent of existing backup products can be written to the ThinkOn infrastructure to service data vaulting and disaster recovery clients.

"For example, more than 80 percent of mid-size enterprises use VMware," McLellan claimed. "The fact we can run cloud on VMware – or other commonly used platforms – provides a comfort level in terms of capabilities. Open source may be cheaper up front, but is not operationally if the customer isn't familiar with it."

Keeping focus on metrics that matter

Since ThinkOn works through channel partners, the core measure of success for McLellan is the level of disruption partners and their customers experience in use of ThinkOn services. "If we do our job right, end users don't know we exist. Ultimately success is measured by the number of disruptions we create."

Minimal disruptions are particularly crucial in a market that is sensitive to rates; moving workloads in the event of poor service delivery can lead to excessive cost for customers who increasingly are able to take advantage of price competition.

ThinkOn's key metric for 2015 was 99.997 percent availability, which was up from 99.896 in 2014. "That tells me we are delivering exactly what customers care about – that is, getting their business to run without having to call us."

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