IT Strategy in the New 'Smart' World

Optimising IT Technology for Business Strategy

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As ElectraLink's Infrastructure & Relationship Manager, I am always trying to understand challenges to our business from an IT perspective, which are continually evolving as we roll out innovative technologies that better support our customers and staff. When I started at the company I set out to answer some of the following questions:

How do we **innovate** with greater agility and faster time to market?

How do we **modernise** our app portfolio?

How do we **maintain** and optimise our current technology?

How do we better **manage** and increase the security of our network?

These are just a few of the challenges facing IT professionals today. Within these considerations lies a unique opportunity to align our IT with our business strategy, and now with cloud capabilities enabling technology, it's more possible than ever. Microsoft products provide endless possibilities, with the likes of Azure, Office365, Skype for Business, Dynamics Online, Security Center and more. The challenge for a growing company like ElectraLink at the centre of the energy industry is to envisage the products in ways that meet our business needs.

Information Technology must adapt to the market in which it operates and the energy market is both maturing and in flux. Our messaging and communications service, the Data Transfer Service (DTS), enables participants to exchange information about electricity and gas customers, via data which flows across its network. The DTS has operated on a Virtual Private Cloud for over three years providing a scalable, resilient and secure environment to cater for increasing numbers of service connections and volumes of data. Our Energy Market Insights business increasingly requires the process of collecting, uploading, storing and processing data to be faster, simpler and increasingly comprehensive.

Based on our business model and the changing environment in which we operate, we have recently migrated to an Amazon Web Services (AWS) platform which delivers a broad set of scalable data-centric services that tackle many of the issues faced by our clients, and which can handle changes introduced within our sector in a secure and resilient way. AWS helps us to move as quickly as possible and its cloud computing facilities cater for our business needs.

This year, as before, security threats remain top of the list, with ransomware incidents on the rise, overtaking other types of malware, and now considered among the most serious threats

to any organisation. To ensure ElectraLink's security is not compromised we have invested in Operations Management Suite for our Azure environment and a new backup software strategy for our hybrid environment. We have recently introduced Skype for Business, which enable our customers to have access to virtual meeting rooms without having to travel into central London, reducing costs and increasing productivity, among other benefits and we will be undertaking remote training for our DTS customers using the same platform providing many of the same time and cost saving benefits.

For our DTS, I believe there are several new themes emerging; a narrowing race among public cloud providers, decreasing private cloud adoption and a renewed focus among enterprise on optimising cloud cost. The below graph shows that 75% of enterprises run within some form of cloud environment.

The data that is transferred across our network has grown and this must be effectively managed. Our DTS connections increased by 38% from January 2016 to January 2017 – with 235 active service connections recorded this January. This is up from 145 connections recorded at the same time in 2015. This means that our market reach is growing, and with the likes of faster switching and smart metering, and its progression to smart grid, innovation is vital. The energy sector is moving to an environment underpinned by data. As a central data hub, it is imperative we move with it.