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Open sky for cloud as the Open Data Center Alliance makes progress in Melbourne

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Early in March, the Open Data Center Alliance (ODCA) steering committee met in Melbourne for two days of meetings to chart priorities for the organisation’s mission to deliver open cloud solutions.

“The Open Data Center Alliance was created to help make cloud and IT purchasing decisions easier for end users by ensuring that everyone was speaking the same language and applying the right standards - the publication of RFP language and online tools help speed adoption of cloud solutions based on Alliance requirements,” said Mario Muller, Vice President IT Infrastructure, BMW Group.

Andrew McLean, Enterprise Technology Specialist for Intel said, “Without open industry standards, cloud won’t happen.”

The alliance is expecting delivery of open cloud solutions to speed an expected \$50 billion in cloud computing investment over the next two years alone.

The ODCA features different levels of membership: contributing members, solution providers and adopter members. Intel is the technical adviser and Cisco is one of the solution provider members.

“The financial services industry is focused on ensuring secure control of data and related infrastructure at all time,” said Adam Bennett, Chief Information Officer, National Australia Bank, the organisation that hosted the ODCA event.

Bennett said: “With a large amount of investment in cloud underway globally, at NAB we saw great reason to participate in the ODCA and join as a founding member of the steering committee in 2010. The main reason for this was that the ODCA’s priorities are determined and driven by its members. For us, it is important that in embracing cloud, our customers’ requirements of the cloud are met. We saw this as a good opportunity to advance both NAB’s - and our customers’ - requirements for cloud computing.”

Bennett said membership in the ODCA has helped NAB make decisions regarding the cloud and the infrastructure needed for cloud computing.

“One of the real strengths of the Open Data Center Alliance is that it represents the voices of many types of organisations. As such, the cloud-based usage models that have been developed take into account the needs of more than just one industry and, as such, are more robust solutions. From NAB’s perspective, being able to draw on this broad expertise means that when we design solutions, the needs of our customers and our business can be met,” he said.

NAB’s cloud strategy is currently focused on developing an internal private cloud capability with partner IBM, Bennett said.

“From NAB’s perspective, one of the successes of the recent Melbourne meeting was that NAB announced

plans for a Proof of Concept evaluation of the ODCA's Security Provider Assurance Usage model, which we hope will be the beginning of other member evaluations throughout 2012," he said.

"Secondly, the ODCA released its new Proposal Engine Assistant tool. This tool allows organisations looking to issue a Request for Proposal (RFP) for a cloud-based service to select requirements based of the ODCA's top five usage models. These cover Security (Provider Assurance and Security Monitoring), Carbon Footprint, I/O Controls and Virtual Machine interoperability. We believe that once providers start to see these requirements issued in RFPs, they will start to tailor products to meet the market demand.

"Further, the next set of usage models that have been in development over the last six months were brought to the table for feedback and review, and the ODCA are looking forward to being able to release them to the public in the next few months," said Bennett .

A new member

Melbourne University is the latest Australian member to join the ODCA, having been accepted as a contributing member.

Dr Rajkumar Buyya is a Professor of Computer Science and Software Engineering at Melbourne University, and holds the position of Director of Cloud Computing and the Cloud Lab at the university.

Buyya said: "The university was accepted because we have the technical expertise to develop open standards, specifications and demonstrate working prototypes. And we have a research lab for cloud and distributed computing. It is a requirement of OCDA that we advance our research and our research must be relevant to real-world needs.

"We had to describe why we had the expertise to be a member. The OCDA working groups look at various aspects of cloud computing like security and infrastructure. Our researchers include PhD students and software engineers who do research into infrastructure. We also look at multiple data centres and how to do intercloud.

"As the first Australian university to be accepted, it is a good fit for us and it will provide multiple benefits in the cloud area because we will benefit from what other organisations are doing so we will not have to do that research. For example, it helps with research by leveraging other inputs and because we use cloud computing in the life sciences, medical, engineering and science faculties.

"The alliance steering members such as NAB and BMW put forward what users need. It is an excellent program that provides us with engagement with global players and helps in guiding our future research," said Buyya.

Questions of cloud interoperability

The OCDA also deals with the question of standardisation and interoperability between cloud solutions.

Daniel Bowers, VP and senior Analyst, Ideas International, said: "The large IT end users who comprise the OCDA can readily achieve consensus on what they want in terms of cloud interoperability and standardised interfaces. The question is: will vendors listen?

"That depends on whether the ODCA members follow through on their promises to steer their IT dollars toward vendors that adhere to their requirements," he said.

"While implementing the standards shouldn't be technically difficult for vendors, OCDA recommendations would make it easier for end users to readily switch between vendors. Enabling an easy exit for your customer is something vendors might not find palatable," said Bowers.

The analyst firm Longhaus publishes an annual research paper called the Longhaus Cloud Pulse. Research Director Scott Stewart has noted some differences between results from the 2011 and 2012 studies.

"The 2011 study revealed a cloud supplier market that was focused on getting something to market and generally it had a low level of functionality.

“The vendors were pressed to put a stake in the ground of the cloud market and there was a rush to get something out there as a cloud offering,” Stewart said.

“This year’s study shows a lot of improvement in the technical delivery of cloud offerings. The functionality has vastly improved but there is still a lack of investment in IT service management (ITSM) so the CIO should rightfully ask, ‘How well do you run your cloud?’”

And the last word goes to Gartner Australia’s Infrastructure Research Director, Phillip Sargeant. “You have everyone getting into the cloud act. It’s the flavour of the year. But they need a strategy - either decide to have a cloud strategy or make a decision not to have a cloud strategy. Nevertheless the decision has to be made either way.”

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