International Journal of Computer Trends and Technology
ISSN: 2231–2803 / https://doi.org/10.14445/22312803/IJCTT-V72I6P119

Volume 72 Issue 6, 142-150, June 2024

Original Article

A Guide to Cloud Computing: Selecting the Right Provider, Evaluating Platforms, and Optimizing Your Cloud Journey

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Received: 16 April 2024 Revised: 22 May 2024 Accepted: 14 June 2024 Published: 29 June 2024

Abstract *- This journal guides organizations in selecting a suitable cloud provider by providing a comprehensive cloud evaluation framework. The framework considers technical factors such as performance, scalability, and reliability; financial factors such as pricing models and cost optimization; and organizational factors such as security, compliance, and governance. The paper also highlights the importance of aligning cloud provider selection with long-term strategic goals and discusses considerations for evaluating cloud platforms, regions, and zones, performance benchmarking, and database modernization in the cloud. The framework and insights provided in this paper aim to assist organizations in making informed decisions and optimizing their cloud journey for success.*

Keywords *- Cloud evaluation framework, Benchmarking, Governance, Performance, Cost optimization*.

1. Introduction

Before the advent of cloud computing, customers operated their own data centers on-premises, requiring significant capital investment and skilled IT staff. They managed physical servers, storage, and network infrastructure, as well as the software stack. Running an on-premises data center requires careful planning, forecasting, and considerations for power, cooling, physical security, and compliance.

On-premises data centers had limitations in scalability, flexibility, and cost-effectiveness. Customers were locked into their own hardware and software, making it difficult to innovate and take advantage of new technologies. They also had to pay for the entire cost of the data center, even if they were not using all of the capacity. Cloud computing has revolutionized the way customers run their data centers. Instead of managing their own infrastructure, customers can now rent computing resources from cloud providers on a pay-as-you-go basis, allowing for quick and easy scaling and payment for only the resources used. Cloud computing also provides access to cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, and analytics without the need for investment in and management of one's own infrastructure.

In the ever-evolving digital landscape, organizations seek to leverage the benefits of cloud computing to enhance their operations and competitiveness. However, choosing the optimal cloud platform can be a daunting task, given the myriad options available.

This study aims to address this challenge by presenting a framework for evaluating and comparing different cloud platforms. By considering key factors such as scalability, security, cost, and operational resilience, organizations can make informed decisions that align with their specific requirements and objectives.

2. Cloud Platform Options

The cloud computing market offers a diverse range of providers, giving customers the freedom to select the platform that best aligns with their specific requirements. Among the leading cloud service providers, AWS (Amazon Web Services), Azure (Microsoft Azure), and Google Cloud stand out. These providers have established a solid track record of delivering reliable, scalable, and cost-effective cloud solutions.

AWS, with its extensive infrastructure and a wide array of services, has become a dominant player in the cloud market. It offers a comprehensive suite of computing, storage, networking, and database services, making it a versatile choice for various workloads. AWS's strength lies in its unmatched breadth of services, allowing customers to build and manage complex applications efficiently.

Azure, Microsoft's cloud platform, has gained significant momentum in recent years. It provides a well-integrated set of services that are deeply aligned with Microsoft's enterprise software ecosystem.

Azure's seamless integration with Windows operating systems, Office 365, and other Microsoft products makes it a compelling choice for organizations heavily invested in Microsoft technologies.

Google Cloud, offered by Google, has emerged as a formidable competitor in the cloud space. It stands out for its advanced artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) capabilities. Google Cloud's suite of AI/ML services, such as Cloud AutoML, Cloud Vision, and Cloud Natural Language, empowers businesses to extract insights from unstructured data and build intelligent applications.

When evaluating cloud providers, customers should consider factors such as the specific services they require, the scalability and reliability of the platform, the level of support provided, and the overall cost structure. AWS, Azure, and Google Cloud offer robust solutions that cater to different customer needs.

By carefully assessing their requirements and aligning them with the strengths of each provider, customers can make an informed decision that optimizes their cloud journey and drives business success.

3. Basics of cloud infrastructure - Regions and Zones

Cloud providers strategically locate their services across diverse geographical regions to maximize customer reach. For instance, a provider could establish distinctive regions like Northern Virginia, Oregon, California, and Dallas within North America to facilitate seamless service delivery.

A region comprises multiple zones, representing logical groupings of data centers designed to guarantee fault tolerance. Each zone is typically located in a separate flood plain and boasts a redundant power supply to optimize resilience. Despite being several miles apart, these zones are strategically positioned to provide low single-digit millisecond latency within the region's boundaries.

Customers have the option to distribute their workloads across multiple regions to strengthen their recovery capabilities in the event of large-scale disasters.

4. Performance Benchmarking

Benchmarking cloud platforms is a critical step for organizations looking to make informed decisions about their cloud infrastructure. By comparing the performance, cost, and features of different cloud providers, organizations can select the platform that best meets their specific needs.

The effectiveness of a cloud platform is essential for organizations seeking rapid and dependable infrastructure. Aspects to encompass processor and memory capability, network bandwidth, and storage performance.

It is essential to ensure a consistent testing environment across all platforms. Run the tests on virtual machines with identical characteristics, such as CPU type, clock speed, and network bandwidth. This approach helps eliminate potential variables and facilitates accurate comparisons between different platforms. Finding machines with equivalent specifications is relatively straightforward.

4.1. Storage Performance Test

All major cloud providers have various disk types that offer performance at different price points. To objectively evaluate the performance, pick an entry-level SSD-type disk to run your performance tests.

Industry standard for running storage performance tests is "fio" which spawns a number of processes doing I/O action on the disk to measure throughput and I/O performance of the disk.

In the example below, a machine running on one of the cloud providers with a disk size of 984GB was used to run the test. The file system /perf_test was mounted on /dev/sdd. Figure 1 below shows the file systems mounted on the machine,

```
root@instance-20240401-141906:/# df -h
Filesystem      Size  Used Avail Use% Mounted on
udev            3.9G     0  3.9G   0% /dev
tmpfs           796M  456K  796M   1% /run
/dev/sdb1       9.7G  2.5G  6.7G  28% /
tmpfs           3.9G     0  3.9G   0% /dev/shm
tmpfs           5.0M     0  5.0M   0% /run/lock
/dev/sdb15      124M   12M  113M  10% /boot/efi
tmpfs           796M     0  796M   0% /run/user/1000
/dev/sdd        984G   17M  934G   1% /perf_test
```

Fig. 1 File system layout

FIO syntax for the test is as follows,

root@instance> fio --directory=/perf_test --name fio_test_file --direct=1 --rw=randwrite --bs=1M --size=1M --numjobs=16 --time_based --runtime=30 --group_reporting --norandommap

By running the test with the aforementioned parameters, a performance assessment on the disk is conducted. The test involved reading and writing operations. As per Figure 2, the results obtained from this test revealed that the disk provided a throughput of 252 MB/s and an impressive I/O of 7587 MB/s.

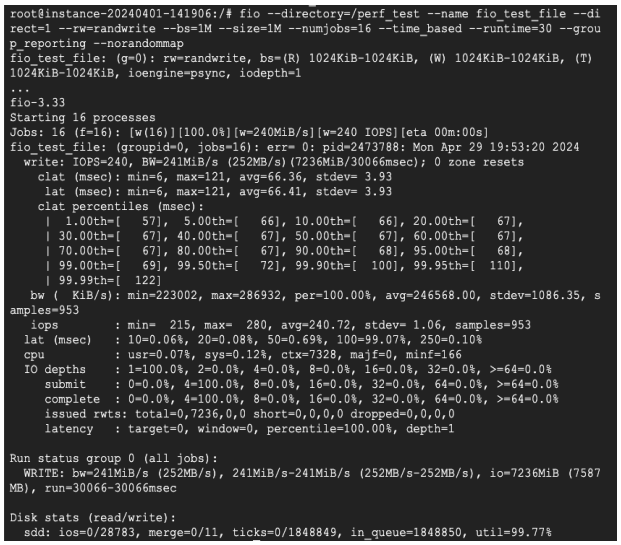

Fig. 2 FIO test results

4.2. Network Bandwidth Performance

In this test, the iperf utility available on Linux is used to measure the bandwidth between two virtual machines operating in the cloud. Customers have the flexibility to select various test configurations, such as running the test between two availability zones within a region, two regions, or within the same availability zone. The specific test scenario is determined by the customer's use case.

This test requires two VMs, with one performing the role of a client and the other as a service provider. As shown in Figure 3, the VMs are set up for running the test,

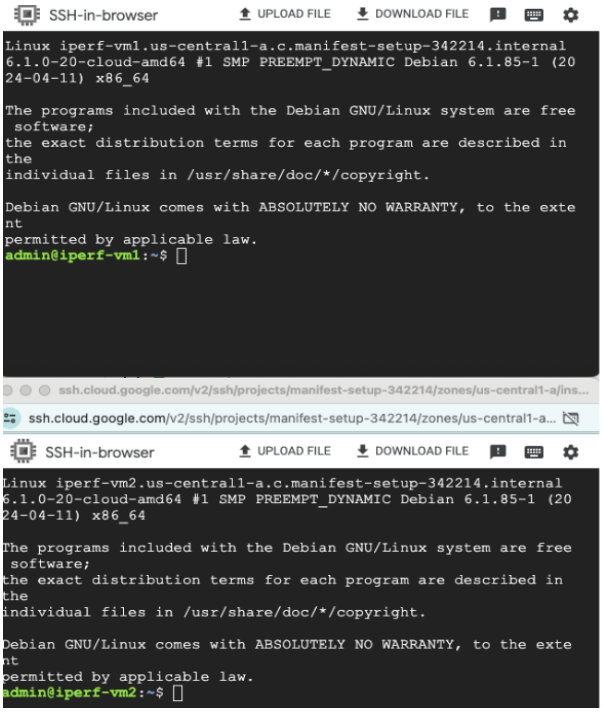

Fig. 3 Test VMs set up for iperf test

In this test case, both VMs are running in the same zone.

Run the below command to start the iperf listener on VM1
iperf -s

On VM2, run the following command to start the test,

iperf -c <ip address of VM1>

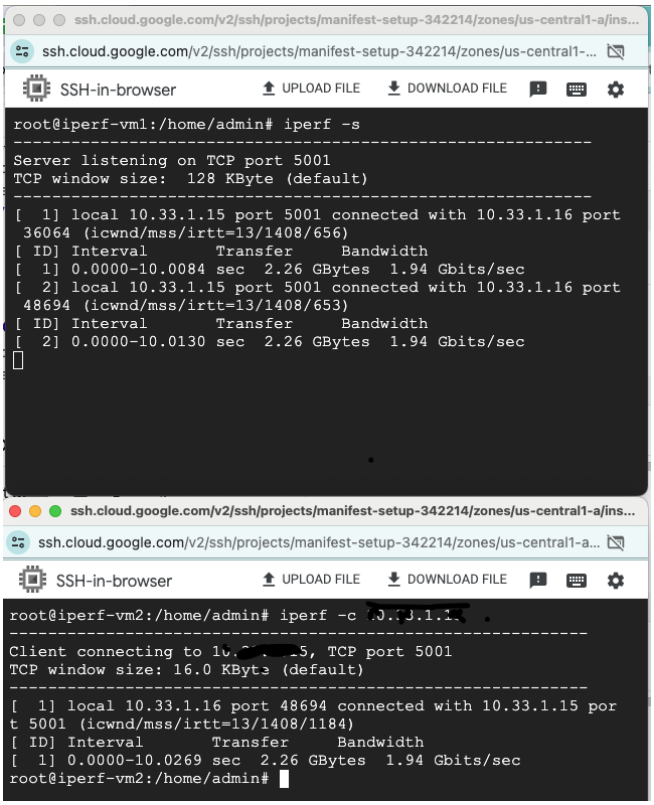

Fig. 4 iperf test results

As shown in Fig. 4, the iperf test results show a bandwidth of 1.94 Gbits/sec.

4.3. Latency Tests VM-to-VM

Evaluating the performance of a network requires crucial tests such as latency and bandwidth. Bandwidth tests measure the volume of data transfer, while latency tests assess the time it takes for data to reach its intended destination. This is especially important for applications with a web tier and a database tier running on separate servers. Customers should conduct ping tests between virtual machines (VMs) to determine latency.

4.4. Latency Tests VM-to-Edge

Customers may need to run latency tests from the edge, depending on the application's architecture. For instance, if a customer intends to host their point-of-sale (PoS) backend on the cloud, they need to test the latency from their client on the edge, potentially located in a retail store. These tests ensure optimal network performance for the application.

When performing such tests, it's essential to leverage the content distribution capabilities of the cloud platform. This allows for caching data closer to the edge in providers' points of presence(PoP), resulting in improved performance and a better user experience.

5. Databases in the Cloud

Customers can modernize databases when migrating to the cloud. This can improve performance, scalability, and security and take advantage of cloud benefits. Consider needs, requirements, and costs when deciding on a modernization project. Resources and vendors are available to assist with database modernization.

Additionally, modernizing databases in the cloud can provide benefits such as increased agility, reduced operational costs, and access to innovative features and services. Organizations should evaluate their current database landscape, identify potential modernization opportunities, and develop a migration plan that aligns with their business goals and objectives.

5.1. Open Source Database Engines

The migration to open-source databases on the cloud presents a significant opportunity for enterprises to revolutionize their database infrastructure and unlock substantial cost savings. Open-source engines like PostgreSQL, MySQL, and MongoDB provide robust features, scalability, and vibrant community support. Leading cloud providers offer a suite of modernization tools to simplify the migration process, ensuring seamless schema conversion and SQL optimization.

Migrating to open-source databases on the cloud offers several advantages, including eliminating expensive licensing costs, gaining greater flexibility and control, and benefiting from a vibrant community of developers and contributors who continuously improve and update the software. Key considerations for enterprises contemplating a cloud migration to open-source databases include database selection, schema conversion, SQL optimization, security, and monitoring and management.

5.2. Managed Databases

Managed database services provide enterprises with a convenient and scalable way to host and manage their databases in the cloud without the need for extensive in-house expertise. Popular services include Microsoft SQL Server (MSSQL), IBM Db2, and Oracle Database. These services offer many benefits, such as reduced costs, improved scalability, enhanced security, and high availability.

By using managed database services, enterprises can benefit from improved performance, scalability, security, and cost-effectiveness. This allows IT teams to focus on core business initiatives and strategic projects rather than spending time on routine database management tasks. As a result, managed database services are becoming increasingly popular among enterprises that want to take advantage of the benefits of the cloud without the associated complexities of managing their own databases.

With cloud providers integrating AI into their managed services offerings, tasks like performance tuning and management have become more streamlined. This has opened the way for even greater operational efficiency and business growth.

6. Security

Security in the cloud is of paramount importance and should be evaluated diligently. Many customers already have robust security practices in place for their current hosting environments. These practices can be seamlessly continued in the cloud, with the added benefit of further enhancements and improvements.

6.1. Encryption

When comparing cloud providers, it's important to consider the following encryption features:

- Encryption at rest: Determine whether the provider offers default encryption for stored data.
- Encryption in transit: Assess how data is encrypted during transmission to ensure secure transfer.
- Customer managed keys: Evaluate the provider's support for customer-managed encryption keys, providing greater control over data protection.
- Customer managed key vaults: Consider the availability of customer-managed key vaults for securely storing and managing encryption keys.
- Rotation of keys: Evaluate the provider's key rotation practices to ensure regular key updates, enhancing security.

When it comes to security, not all cloud providers are equal. A comprehensive grasp of the features outlined above could be crucial in making informed decisions.

6.2. SIEM and SOAR

Enterprises migrating to the cloud have two options regarding their Security Information and Event Management (SIEM) and Security Orchestration, Automation, and Response (SOAR) systems: either bring their current systems to the cloud or transition to a more cloud-native solution. Migrating existing SIEM and SOAR systems to the cloud can offer cost savings, scalability, flexibility, and enhanced security. However, it can also be complex, raise data sovereignty concerns, and lead to vendor lock-in.

Transitioning to a more cloud-native solution, on the other hand, involves replacing existing systems with cloud-

native SIEM and SOAR systems designed to leverage the cloud's capabilities. This approach offers reduced complexity, improved security, increased innovation, and reduced vendor lock-in. The decision between these two approaches depends on factors such as integration capabilities, security requirements, and technical capabilities and should be carefully considered to ensure a smooth and successful migration to the cloud.

A hybrid approach is also possible to get the best of both worlds.

6.3. Intrusion Detection and Intrusion Prevention

When opting for cloud platforms, customers must evaluate their existing infrastructure and make a decision regarding intrusion detection systems. These platforms offer well-integrated intrusion detection systems that are seamlessly synchronized with their services. On the other hand, for intrusion prevention, many customers prefer to rely on third-party firewalls like Palo Alto, Crowdstrike, or Fortinet. However, the burden lies with the customer to ensure compatibility between their firewall data and the Cloud providers' SIEM (Security Information and Event Management) and SOAR (Security Orchestration, Automation, and Response) systems.

This compatibility is crucial for automating security operations end-to-end. Ensuring compatibility can be a complex and time-consuming process, and it can be difficult to keep up with the constantly changing threat landscape. As a result, many organizations are turning to managed security services providers (MSSPs) to help them manage their cloud security.

6.4. Layer 7 security

In recent years, DDoS and web attacks have become more frequent and sophisticated, rendering traditional security measures ineffective. Major cloud providers have responded by offering DDoS and WAF (Web Application Firewall) services to protect cloud-based services from these types of attacks. The integration of Machine Learning (ML) mechanisms has made these services even more effective in detecting and blocking attacks in real-time, including previously unknown ones.

Cloud-native layer 7 security is a robust alternative to traditional security measures, designed to protect web applications and services from attacks at the application layer, where most attacks occur. It offers a range of benefits, including protection against a wide range of attacks, real-time protection, scalability, and cost-effectiveness.

6.5. Compliance

Businesses frequently need to keep an eye on compliance with NIST rules. Cloud providers provide the ability to gauge how well workloads deployed in the cloud meet regulatory requirements. Customers must evaluate whether the security measures offered by cloud providers allow them to manage their infrastructure in accordance with NIST standards. It is crucial to conduct this evaluation to make sure that the cloud infrastructure satisfies regulatory standards and adheres to best practices for data security and protection.

To guarantee a seamless transition, customers must evaluate cloud providers' capabilities in this field.

7. Management Tools

In the era of cloud computing and infrastructure as code(IaC), automated infrastructure deployment, monitoring, and management are essential for businesses. Automation improves efficiency, consistency, scalability, cost-effectiveness, security, and compliance. Platform choice with robust automation features offers a competitive advantage. Careful evaluation of platforms' capabilities is crucial for meeting business needs and achieving goals.

7.1. Deployment Automation

Organizations leveraging on-premises deployment automation and CI/CD tools for infrastructure management must evaluate cloud providers' Infrastructure as Code (IaC) capabilities during cloud selection. This assessment ensures seamless integration between existing tools and cloud-based IaC offerings.

Many enterprises are considering a multi-cloud or hybrid model, which necessitates a unified deployment framework to manage infrastructure across platforms. A widely adopted approach involves using Terraform for infrastructure deployment and Ansible for software deployment. In such scenarios, verifying whether the cloud provider offers Terraform and Ansible code for deploying commonly used products like DB2, Oracle, SAP, and MSSQL is crucial. This strategy guarantees coherence and streamlining in the deployment procedure, resulting in an increased adoption pace.

7.2. Monitoring

In a multi-cloud or hybrid model, where organizations have infrastructure resources spread across different platforms, monitoring becomes crucial. Centralized monitoring is key for efficient management in such scenarios. Companies that rely on tools like Splunk and Datadog must verify that their current tools can integrate seamlessly with the cloud infrastructure to ensure effective monitoring.

7.3. Patching

Cloud providers offer patch management tools that enhance security, reduce the risk of data breaches, and ensure regulatory compliance. These tools automate patch rollouts, detect and remediate security vulnerabilities, and centralize patch management across different operating systems. Most customers have their own tools for managing patches, but

during a transition to the cloud, it's advisable to leverage the cloud providers' patch management capabilities for seamless integration.

8. Compute

While all cloud providers offer appealing computing options, each platform provider has its own set of unique characteristics that can influence customer choices.

8.1. Chipsets

In the expansive landscape of cloud computing, customers are presented with a multitude of alternatives to host their workloads, one of which is virtual machines (VMs) backed by processors from Intel, Arm, AMD, and Nvidia. Cloud providers are in constant pursuit of offering the most recent chipsets, aiming to deliver enhanced performance.

In recent years, cloud providers have begun investing in their own chipsets based on ARM processors. This move has been driven by the desire to offer lower-cost alternatives to traditional x86 processors from Intel and AMD, which have been the dominant players in the market for many years.

Customers should carefully evaluate the capabilities of the provider and also potential applications that could take advantage of ARM processors to unlock cost savings. When evaluating a provider, customers should thoroughly assess its capabilities and the potential applications that can leverage ARM processors to achieve significant cost savings.

8.2. VMware in the Cloud

Despite the availability of unique hypervisors for each cloud provider, many customers see VMware as a valuable solution due to their long-standing investment in it. To ensure a seamless transition of workloads, customers with applications reliant on VMware should evaluate cloud providers that offer VMware solutions.

8.3. Custom Silicon

Cloud providers are increasingly turning to custom silicon to improve the performance and efficiency of their virtualized environments. Custom silicon refers to specialized hardware components designed to handle specific functions that would otherwise be performed by the hypervisor. This approach has several benefits, including reduced hypervisor overhead, increased VM efficiency, enhanced scalability, improved security, and reduced power consumption.

Offloading tasks to custom silicon reduces the workload on the hypervisor, making it leaner and more efficient. This results in lower overhead and improved performance for virtual machines (VMs) running on the hypervisor. VMs benefit from the dedicated hardware resources provided by custom silicon. By offloading certain functions to ASICs, VMs can access specialized hardware acceleration, leading to improved performance and lower latency.

In practice, a virtual machine on a cloud provider with custom offload capabilities significantly outperforms a provider lacking such technology.

8.3. Pricing Models

Cloud providers present various pricing structures for consuming their services effectively. Customers must thoroughly understand their workloads to leverage these options fully. For example, applications requiring continuous operation (24x7x365) can benefit from a pricing model that provides sustained usage discounts.

The optimal approach for building applications involves a combination of pricing models, offering the best value. It is the responsibility of customer IT teams to find the appropriate balance among these models to optimize cost and functionality.

8.3.1. On-Demand Pricing

Pay-as-you-go pricing is a billing model where customers pay for cloud computing resources based on their actual usage, making it ideal for organizations with fluctuating workloads or seeking flexibility and cost-effectiveness. The key benefit is flexibility, as customers can scale their cloud usage up or down as needed without long-term commitments.

Customers initiating their journey in cloud computing typically commence with On-Demand pricing models. As their use becomes more consistent and sustainable, they tend to transition to longer-term commitment models.

8.3.2. Reserved Pricing

Organizations seeking continuous operation can achieve significant cost savings by opting for 1-year or 3-year pricing models. In comparison to the prevailing On-Demand model, these commitment models provide substantial discounts ranging from 40-60%. To cater to CAPex-like expenditures, organizations also have the option of making an upfront payment for the term.

8.3.3. Spot Instances

When instant VM availability isn't crucial, such as in batch processing tasks or data analysis, spot VMs offer significant cost-saving opportunities. Priced lower than on-demand instances, spot VMs allow customers to leverage spare cloud capacity for cost-effective workloads, with potential discounts of up to 90%.

8.3.4. Capacity Planning

Contrary to the common belief that cloud capacity is limitless, it is essential for customers to reserve capacity in specific regions and zones to ensure the availability of virtual machines (VMs). When customers commit to a three-year VM usage, they receive a discount, but it is important to note that this is a billing arrangement and does not guarantee the reservation of capacity. Customers must actively hold capacity to ensure that VMs are reserved for their use.

To guarantee a seamless failover, customers must reserve at least the minimum required capacity in the dedicated disaster recovery region.

9. Storage

Cloud providers offer a range of storage solutions, including block and object storage options tailored to various customer requirements. Block storage is designed for storing persistent data and is often used for running databases and applications that require fast read/write access. Object storage is commonly utilized for storing large volumes of unstructured data.

9.1. Block Storage

In the domain of network-attached SSD storage, cloud providers offer a diverse portfolio of storage solutions tailored to meet a wide range of customer needs, presenting a broad spectrum of price-performance options. Customers must approach the selection of storage for their applications with caution, as it can significantly impact their overall costs.

Traditionally, customers were limited to on-premises storage solutions with limited flexibility and scalability. However, the advent of cloud computing has transformed this landscape, empowering customers with a plethora of cloud-based storage options. This enables customers to select the storage solution that precisely aligns with their performance requirements, thereby allowing for greater cost control and optimization.

9.2. Local Storage(SSD)

For improved performance, local SSDs are connected directly to VMs and are transient by nature. Each cloud provider has distinct offerings regarding the default storage available on VMs. Customers should assess their options based on their specific storage requirements.

9.3. Object Storage

Object storage is ideal for storing large amounts of unstructured data. It is commonly used for archiving enterprise data to meet compliance requirements. Multi-tiered storage options allow customers to choose the right storage for long-term archival at a lower cost. This flexibility ensures efficient and cost-effective data management. Object storage offers a reliable and scalable solution for long-term data preservation.

Some cloud providers excel in offering robust cross-region storage replication as a built-in feature, facilitating seamless disaster recovery capabilities.

10. Cloud Region Selection

Customers have a wide range of options when choosing a cloud region to host their workloads, with over 30 regions offered by each cloud provider globally. While location often plays a significant role in region selection, there are often multiple suitable choices.

To effectively cater to both primary and disaster recovery needs, businesses must implement a dual-region strategy for their operations. This approach enables them to meet various availability requirements and achieve optimal operational outcomes.

The selection of region pairs is often driven by the cost of services, reliability of the region, and latency from the corporate datacenter.

10.1. Economical Regions

The cost of services is often driven by many factors, primarily driven by economies of scale. Customers should carefully assess the cost of services to find a region that is most economical.

10.2. Stability of the Region

Regarding stability, not all regions are created equal. Cloud providers frequently roll out their latest offerings in select regions within each geographic location. This can lead to a sudden surge in customer traffic, potentially resulting in bottlenecks and outages. To ensure a reliable experience, customers are advised to carefully assess the performance indicators of specific regions using data from independent sources.

10.3. Latency

The relevance of latency from a corporate data center is limited to scenarios where customers have a hybrid long-term strategy involving the use of both on-premises data centers and cloud services. In most cases, however, customers need not be overly concerned with a few additional milliseconds of latency when making their selection.

10.4. Availability of Services

Before choosing a region, inquire about the rollout roadmap to ensure that the necessary services and capacity will be available. It’s common for regions to lack certain services because new ones are introduced gradually.

11. Continuous Governance

Cost optimization in cloud computing is a continuous endeavor due to the inherent flexibility and scalability of cloud resources. Unlike on-premises environments, where resources are often fixed, cloud computing offers virtually unlimited computing, storage, and networking capabilities. This boundless availability poses a unique challenge in controlling costs effectively. To address this, organizations must establish a robust cloud governance model and dedicate a team focused on financial operations (FinOps) to ensure efficient cost management.

To achieve operational excellence, security, reliability, and performance, customers can optimize their operations by utilizing the advanced tools offered by the cloud platform. These tools are tailored to help customers conduct self-assessments of their workloads, allowing them to make informed decisions and implement improvements. Evaluating the capabilities of each provider and choosing the right one is crucial to maximizing operational efficiency and success.

12. Conclusion

In summary, the cloud computing landscape presents a varied array of platforms and services, each designed to meet the unique demands of different organizations. Through meticulous evaluation of factors like cost, performance, and functionality, enterprises can identify a cloud provider that aligns with their strategic objectives and contributes to their business success. The advent of cloud computing has transformed business operations, offering scalability, adaptability, and easy access to cutting-edge technologies. This has empowered organizations to foster innovation and stimulate growth in the digital age. Establishing a scoring mechanism to assess providers based on key features empowers customers to conduct an objective evaluation of their capabilities, ensuring alignment with their specific requirements.

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