# NOW IS THE TIME FOR CONNECTING CONTROLS TO THE CLOUD

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Lack of clear guidance and concerns about security have led some businesses to be cautious about connecting their building systems to the cloud. But a new generation of solutions is set to blow those fears away, suggests Priva UK and Ireland Sales Manager Gavin Holvey.



**The introduction of any significant new area of technology is bound to be accompanied by some feelings of trepidation, but they seem to have been particularly acute when it comes to the cloud. Whilst every discussion on the subject invariably addresses the opportunities for immense storage capacity and more flexible operations, these observations are frequently tempered by concerns about security and asset management.**

Intriguingly, these worries are less pronounced in the domestic sphere, where most users are now entirely happy to use the cloud to store their music, photos, video clips, and even records of passwords and other important documentation, allowing them to enjoy vital back-ups and enable the freeing-up of space on their laptops and other devices. But for reasons that seem in part to be psychologically-oriented, the transition to the professional and commercial worlds seems more uneasy. Can I be sure that my data will be secure and managed efficiently when it's no longer sitting in my building, some users clearly worry. Can it really be wise to put these vital tasks in the hands of a third-party who is simultaneously storing and managing the assets of many other companies, in many other sectors, and with sometimes hugely divergent requirements?

The short answer is 'yes'; the rather longer answer will be provided by the rest of this article. But to focus on our sector – building management systems (BMS) and other automation technologies – for a moment, we believe that the advantages of using systems that are cloud-linked can be particularly advantageous. For a start, it is much more straightforward to enable remote access to multiple buildings over the internet without the need for VPNs. Moreover, the cloud's 'any time, any place' mandate means that the adjustment and management of systems can be undertaken by administrators around the clock and from any location. This means that it is also much easier to keep tabs on system performance and energy usage, allowing problems to be identified and addressed at the earliest possible stage.

Although the number of BMS specialists offering cloud services is now growing, we were one of the first to join the fray in 2012. Since then we have invested considerable effort in developing cloud-linked BMS for a wide variety of sectors and applications, and as such we now believe that there is a compelling case for all end-user groups to consider making the leap into the cloud.

## Fit for the future

First and foremost, the world of work – from offices to factories to oil refineries – is evolving rapidly, with different expectations of output as well as operational practices. For building management systems this has implications in terms of patterns of occupation and different needs – for example in terms of heating and lighting – during the course of the day. Linking your BMS to the cloud makes it much easier to respond to these patterns as well as the requests of personnel, no matter where building management staff are located. This also paves the way for the building management team itself to be more efficient with effective simultaneous control of multiple sites – for example, a banking organisation that has multiple premises spaced out across a major city – becoming far easier.

As well as the flexibility that this brings both for current and possible future operations, the movement of responsibility to a third-party can serve to free up a company's own engineers to work on other important technical aspects of a building, such as its local area networks and conferencing systems. There are also likely to be savings of physical space down in the rack and equipment rooms, as well as in terms of the maintenance required to maintain extensive in-house storage infrastructures.

But although some might still struggle to accept it, it is possible that the greatest benefits actually do relate to security. Simply put, the number and variety of online threats is growing all the time, and in all but the very largest and most well-resourced of companies it is becoming almost impossible to keep track of them. Indeed, not even global giants can count on complete security of their data, as a series of recent high-profile news stories attests.

Far better, then, to link your services to those of a specialist for whom protection of assets is the absolute numero uno priority. Indeed, our own experience with customers indicates that it's often when they do switch to the cloud that they realise how vulnerable they have been in some regards – the process of moving to a cloud-based service providing the ideal opportunity to look afresh at security.

Underlining all of these arguments needs to be the fact there will be no open ports into the business from the cloud – it's one way traffic only as all information is sent securely from the business to the cloud, with the cloud itself not sending anything into the business. It's a simple enough point, but one that can sometimes still get lost in the more fevered debates around the topic.

## Scale and suitability

Those reasons to adopt cloud-based operation will remain consistent as the actual services that underpin them continue to evolve. In our case, this has meant the move towards a pure subscription model that allows end-users to select the services they require, with subs to be renewed on annual basis. In addition, different packages have been tailored towards the requirements and skills of different groups. For example, Remote Management – which provides remote access with the installer doing the remote engineering/management – is geared towards installers, maintenance organisations and building user/owners. TC Energy facilitates insight into energy usage in order to increase cost-savings, and is targeted at building user/owners and maintenance organisations. Then there is the maintenance organisation-oriented BI Metrics, which provides a wealth of information regarding the performance of the equipment in the maintained building(s) with a view to assuring the best possible comfort against the lowest possible energy cost.

All of these services are reinforced by Priva's long-term cloud supplier Microsoft with its Azure services. From a competitive field we determined that their data policy, size and scale, renown as a supplier, excellent support capabilities, and comprehensive PaaS portfolio were best able to meet the needs of our BMS customers. The fact that 90% of Fortune 500 companies now use Azure surely underlines the wisdom of this choice.

If all of that isn't enough to allay fears then we are also in a position to offer customers dual data centre operation so that in the extremely unlikely event of a hack, their activities and data will continue to be supported by a second facility.

My observation from trade shows and conferences over the last year is that the tide is now turning, and that almost all organisations are seeing the value of putting at least some of their data and services into the cloud. With the future likely to bring more home and/or remote working, and the need for premises to be reconfigured or redeployed more rapidly in response to changing requirements, the adoption of cloud-based BMS packages is set to be especially pronounced.

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