

Zhou Songnian, 52

Chief executive officer of
Platform Computing

Oriental cloud



ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM

Cloud computing is an oriental concept, according to Platform Computing's chief executive officer. **TAN CHONG YAW** reports

CLOUD computing is philosophically oriental, according to Dr Zhou Songnian.

"The underlying concept in cloud computing is sharing and sharing of resources is distinctively oriental," explained Songnian, 52, chief executive officer of Platform Computing.

The staccato-speaking Songnian is gung-ho about cloud computing, contending that it would become an IT tornado over the next five years.

He was in Singapore last month as the keynote speaker at GridAsia, an annual conference on grid technology.

Cloud computing is a new way to deploy computing technology to give users the ability to access, work on, share and store information using the Internet.

The cloud, a metaphor for the Internet, is a network of data centres that can perform computing functions on a personal or business computer by providing users access to powerful applications, platform, and services delivered over the Internet.

It can help a company reduce its costs and, more critically, grab business opportunities because it can respond faster.

"It's about making money – not saving money. If you want to save money, shut down the company," he said.

Platform Computing, headquartered in Ontario, Canada, is a privately-owned software company that provides grid –

having several computers tackle a problem at the same time – and cloud computing software.

Songnian, a Canadian citizen who was born in Beijing, was one of the first to receive a university education in China after the cultural revolution ended in 1977. He earned a PhD in computer science from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1987 and founded Platform Computing with two others in 1992. Today, the company has more than 500 staff, 15 offices – including one in Singapore – and over 2,000 customers worldwide.

Songnian did not reveal the company's annual takings but remarked that it has been growing and profitable every year since 1992.

He has come a long way for a person who saw his first computer at the age of 20.

Then, the computer was fed programs and data through punch tape – a long strip of paper with holes punched in it to store programs and data.

Is cloud computing just hype?

Expectations have been raised high. There will be a trough when there is failure to deliver the hype. But cloud computing will bring benefits and become mainstream in one to two years or even sooner.

Almost every IT firm describes itself as a cloud vendor. Is this correct?

Actually most are not. Tomorrow, the term "cloud computing" may go out of fashion and another catch phrase is born.

But the name doesn't matter. The benefits of cloud computing in distributed computing, the integration of enterprise resources and turning computing IT into a service have fundamental value.

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What advice would you give to a company wanting to take advantage of cloud computing?

Try it in little steps.

Identify an application for cloud computing. Take no more than three to six months. Get the benefits and gain the experience.

If you like the results, then take another step. Bring another application into the cloud. Then expand the operation from one location to multiple locations.

The primary barrier to adoption isn't technology. It's the attitude people have that that box – say a server – is theirs. Actually, they're sharing it.

Users need to see that by sharing and effectively managing the system, they get more resources that they need and at lower costs.

What would information technology be like in 10 years' time?

IT will become boring and mundane. It will fade into the background. You won't see it. You won't talk about it.

Any industry or business service that is mature – like the automotive industry – is highly automated.

The reality is that as smart as we are, humans are the slowest, most expensive and error-prone part of IT.

Cloud computing is the maturation of the Internet.

In a mature industry, you will focus on the content. Not on the hardware. Not the mechanics of delivery.

You really don't care what technologies the TV station uses, you just want to watch the show.

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