

Gaurav Dhillon: 'The cloud is safer than any other form of managing data applications'



Software as a service, commonly known by its acronym SaaS, has become the way of the land for large corporations. Instead of buying and installing software to manage information in different parts of the business, such as customer relationship management and billing, many now subscribe to software services hosted by third-party providers. For companies, this model of engaging with software has big implications for cybersecurity. "The cloud is safer than any other form of managing data applications", says Gaurav Dhillon, chairman and CEO of SnapLogic, a SaaS company that integrates the different types of software used by corporations and makes them dialogue with each other. "Almost all the leaks so far have happened from on-premise applications." Dhillon spoke with LSE Business Review's managing editor, **Helena Vieira**, on 8 November, during Web Summit, in Lisbon.

Can you explain exactly what SnapLogic does?

We help enterprises that are large companies, like AstraZeneca, Emirates, Schneider Electric, connect their new SaaS applications to the on-premise application that they already have. And they need that because without connecting enterprise applications the overall benefit is not attained. It's like buying a pair of speakers that you can't hook up to your stereo. It's no good. It has to work with the whole thing. That's what SnapLogic does. And typically we're called in along with cloud applications, because the cloud nature of our platform. We're regarded as being good at bringing cloud applications into enterprises.

Can you give us an example?

Sure. A very common example is an enterprise that already has enterprise resource planning (ERP) software that they bought in the 1990s from SAP. They might be buying new cloud software for customer relationship management, like Salesforce, or human capital management, like Workday. That's a job for SnapLogic. We get called into those kinds of jobs to help large companies put it all together. We're a SaaS platform that makes overall enterprise applications work better.

Do you work with other SaaS providers or do you compete with them?

We work with them. What happens is, just like in the world we live in, there's a need for a neutral party, a Switzerland, who doesn't have any particular agenda with regard to any particular application and we act on behalf of the customer to make whatever they buy work together, to give them option values, so they can replace things as needed, and also to help them get the most out of their investment.

Who is your typical client? A small firm or a large corporation?

A large corporation. A typical client in the UK is AstraZeneca, a FTSE-listed company, £23 billion in revenue last year. We talk to the CIO or someone working for the CIO. For instance, David Smoley in AstraZeneca, his job is to perform a digital transformation around customers, around employees, around how they look towards getting their drug pipelines and those sorts of things all working together. Typically someone like that brings in someone like us to make all these things work together.

You're not in the data business per se?

We manage data in flight. We're not in the business of data at rest. Data at rest in either applications, clouds or databases. We make it fly.

So you're not handling any of your client's information?

It passes through our system, but we don't retain it. We help them manipulate it to get the most out of it.

How do you deal with cybersecurity? It's a big threat right now.

It is. First and foremost, the cloud is sort of like flying. It is still statistically safer than any other form of managing data applications. Almost all the leaks so far have happened from on-premise applications. The way our partners, who are cloud application providers, build their applications, they go through a lot of rigorous testing because by definition it's going to be sitting out in the cloud, and anyone with a browser can try to get into it. I would say the barriers are higher for cloud applications. They're better designed. They're designed in an age of cybersecurity awareness, and then what we've done at Snaplogic is that we work with some of the finest companies in the world to have practices and technologies in place to ensure that when it's in our hands, the data is safe, and that we safely pass it on to the destination. We route the data in a very safe manner. It's a combination of technology and business practices, and we work very hard to get both of these parts in unison. So much so that some of the people who provide security consulting to some of the big intelligence agencies are customers of ours.

So you recommend to businesses that they should move to the cloud?

Yes, wholeheartedly. The benefits are very clear. Running stuff on premise may historically have been how we did things but I don't see that as the future. I think it's simply a matter of time. Applications and data – and this is a new thing over the past year or so – are moving to the cloud at a fast pace.

The subject of your talk is avoiding cloud lock-in. Can you explain why?

It's tempting to become an expert in a particular brand, in getting better and better at driving a particular kind of car. But ultimately our job is to have transportation, not to specialise in a brand of vehicle. In that same fashion, given all the innovation in technology and pricing that is happening from the three main public cloud providers – Amazon, Microsoft Azure and Google with the Google Cloud Platform. There's such a pace of innovation that one has to think about one's needs and not get locked into anyone. But used together, actually you can get much more out of them and more for yourself.

How do you work with all these providers?

We work with all of them, equally, again going back to my Switzerland example. We leave it up to our customers to decide what vendor they want to use as a primary provider, which one they want to use as a backup for disaster recovery. Almost all of our clients, our large clients, use all of the above. And some even use specialised clouds, like we have a client who is using the Alibaba cloud in China, named AliCloud. They're specialising in particular kinds of data that has to stay in China. And because of the sensitivity of it, and the economics, the AliCloud offer was very good for them. So, we work with them, no problem.

We see that with consumers, at least, these providers change the terms of service so fast, you start controlling your data and then, all of a sudden, your data is not yours anymore... Is this a risk for businesses too?

Well, I see this as an opportunity. The other side of that coin is risk. It all comes down to this: people should have capability without a particular cloud to be able to get the benefits of cloud computing. Just like we can write our notes on any word processor. Yes, we like to have a favourite one, but we should be able to move from one word processor to the other, from one smartphone to the other, without feeling that we're captive to that particular smartphone. We should always give rise to innovation. And in fairness to the cloud providers, it's not like there's any sinister manoeuvring afoot. It's just that the pace of change is so fast that they're trying to compete with each other and obsolete themselves before the competition does it. In keeping up with that, you see new potential emerge all the time. [Dynamic pricing](#), [reserved instances](#) at Amazon, the way data is managed, the way you and I have graphical processing in silicon that you can spin up for data science applications, for artificial intelligence-types of use cases. These are all innovations that have happened in the past two years, you know? Some of the pricing innovations that are going on as new cloud people come in and pressure Amazon, from Amazon, are no doubt a response to competitive pressure. So we don't necessarily go in and try to pick a cloud for our customers. Our job is to make sure they're successful no matter what they pick, and they're not locked in.

Where do you stand in the continuum between pessimism and optimism regarding technology?

I'm optimistic. I see it as a new industrial age. We don't make objects painstakingly by hand anymore. We haven't done that since the industrial age. Machines stamp out objects. Instead of child labour weaving cloth we have looms that make cloth. And no doubt some of those jobs were lost, but I would ask "what child wants to be working in a mill with a fire hazard at the age of 8, weaving cloth by hand?" I think some of the jobs that will be lost probably shouldn't have existed in the first place. People will have to deal with that, just like we dealt with the industrial age. But some of the jobs will elevate to being able to control machines, and to be able to get leverage, just like we do today. That's just the nature of innovation and progress for humanity. We all bemoan the loss of jobs. On the other hand, we don't have a servant class in the Western world, do we? Do we miss those jobs, really? You know, it's the worst job in the world, seven days a week, no pension, turned down at any point, so in hindsight we might look back and see that some of those jobs were a form of servitude.

You're not afraid of AI, not afraid that it'll control us in the future?

No, no more than lasers. You can use lasers to do surgery, do welding, or as weapons. To me it's how we use it and I don't think there's any imminent danger of a computer composing a symphony that moves us, that makes us cry, that makes our hair stand on end. Those higher forms of creativity will still be done by humans.



- *This Q&A is part of a series of interviews during the [Web Summit](#) conference in Lisbon, 6-9 November 2017. The conversation was edited for clarity.*
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