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# LiftOff Teaches Clients to Fish in the Cloud

## Case Study: LiftOff

**LIFT OFF**

It has been said that "If you give a man a fish, he will eat for a day.  If you teach a man to fish, you have fed him for a lifetime."  LiftOff, LLC, a Mid-Atlantic-based professional services firm, is taking that philosophy to the IT world with great effect.  By deploying cloud-based systems with an educational approach, LiftOff is teaching clients a brand-new way to tackle technology altogether.

Ron Braatz, the founder and president of LiftOff, began his professional life as a teacher.  With a Masters Degree in technology education from Johns Hopkins University, Braatz has taught computer science courses at the high school and graduate levels.  That led him into the information technology field and into the employ of some of the industry's heaviest hitters — including Microsoft.  When Microsoft began investing in cloud computing technology, Braatz saw an opportunity to bridge the gap between the cloud and businesses that wanted to reach it.

"Microsoft was heavily investing in cloud infrastructure and I really liked the product right from the start," Braatz said. "I've observed companies deploying IT projects for years and there was just too much failure. I knew that LiftOff could help to successfully launch cloud projects, and we

**Ron Braatz, Founder and President of LiftOff**

could coach these organizations through the complex process."

He saw the opportunity for a three-pronged convergence — his love of training and teaching; Microsoft's investment in cloud technology; and struggling IT deployment projects.

"I literally wanted to help companies launch IT projects," Braatz said.  "Help them understand the change management, make sure they were aware and that they were working with the right cloud tools and migration strategies.  We are helping companies 'lift off' new projects."

LiftOff is a company that was literally "born in the cloud" and was created to live there.

In the 21st century, nearly all companies need email and collaboration capabilities on one level or another, and nearly all have IT departments that are charged with deploying and managing these systems.  LiftOff was not created to replace that. Rather, LiftOff's charge is to come alongside the existing IT personnel, advise the team toward the right tools, train it in the deployment of those tools, then gently nudge it further into the cloud on its own.

As LiftOff approaches its 100th deployment, this "coaching methodology" has proven to be effective time after time.

### Retrofitting the IT Professional

The traditional director of information technology suffers a sort of cloud phobia.  Although usually a highly trained professional with an advanced degree, the very idea of cloud technology is perceived as a threat to some IT Departments.  If all of the technology lives in the cloud, if the software is constantly

upgraded in the cloud, if there is no server to watch, what is the role of the IT director in this new world? LiftOff answers those questions.

"The role of the IT Professional is changing.  No longer does a company need to employ IT people to manage and watch servers.  The days of monitoring blinking lights will soon be behind us all.," said Brian Reilly, senior consultant at LiftOff.  "The good news is that the role of the IT Professional is now elevated.  IT pros know how systems work and can focus on deploying workflows that have a greater impact on operations.  These workers are becoming more visible in the workplace and contributing to the bottom line."

LiftOff also shortens the learning curve. Migrating to a new email and collaboration system is not simple.  IT Pros no longer need to spend valuable time researching which servers and software are the best fit, as well as learning how to launch the new system and troubleshooting the bugs. LiftOff already has experts in those areas.

"We do these bursts of consulting and training with a client that literally saves them days, possibly weeks of trying to figure things out on their own," Braatz said.  "One of my customers said we are his insurance policy for

**Brian Reilly, Senior Consultant at LiftOff**

a successful deployment."

An example came when entreQuest, a management consulting company in Baltimore, Maryland was attempting to move to the Microsoft cloud.

entreQuest was facing a typical challenge for IT staff. Their old mail server was 8 years old and failing. Moving to the cloud was a simple decision for CEO Joe Mechlinski at entreQuest.

"Our users are familiar with Microsoft products and we wanted to continue using Microsoft technologies," Mechlinski said. "It made sense financially and operationally to move to the cloud. LiftOff guided us through the entire process, and we continue to find new and innovative ways to leverage the collaboration components of the Microsoft cloud."

## One-Product Mentality

Because LiftOff offers exclusively Microsoft products, the company is able to cut through the noise and focus on the right plan for each customer, which provides a very repeatable model. At any point, between eight and 15 projects are underway.

Braatz and Reilly are involved in every client assessment. And, every assessment begins with a 41-question session that defines the migration path and begins the training process. Once that path is determined, the LiftOff staff begins to deploy key users into the new system — and usually begins with the IT staff. As this is taking place, those same staff members are being trained so they can take over the deployment and migrate the rest of the company. The deployment model can be completely virtual and LiftOff delivers these services all over the world.

"It is all about empowering the customer," Reilly said. "We want them to understand what they have, how to deploy it and how to use it. The model doesn't mean we are onsite doing all of the work. We have trained them and then we've gotten out of their way so that they can do it themselves with the confidence that they are going to do it right."

The United States Naval Academy Alumni Association and Foundation supports the Naval Academy with private funding and member services to more than 50,000 living alumni with an alumni magazine, special events and more. Like most businesses, the Association faced upgrading an aging Exchange server and e-mail system. The IT staff decided to move to hosted services and engaged LiftOff.

According to a Forrester study commissioned by Microsoft, implementing



**Joe Mechlinski, CEO of entreQuest, consults with Ron Braatz and Brian Reilly at LiftOff**

a Microsoft Office 365 platform can save up to $.5 million in hardware, software, license fees and IT support efforts. However, the Alumni Association and Foundation also realized a cost benefit in IT employees who are now able to spend time on other projects.

"Rather than being focused on this piece of equipment, it has really enabled my people to focus on other projects and other capabilities that will enable our mission, build out our infrastructure, video teleconferencing capabilities and other things," said Ken Kurz, director of information services for the Alumni Association and Foundation. "If we were able to do that, we can rely on Microsoft and their team of experts and technicians and so on, for the basics."

Another benefit came with hurricane strength — Hurricane Irene to be exact. The offices in Annapolis were without power for four days. Out were the Alumni Association and Foundation's Web and database servers, and its ability to access its relationship-management software.

"Our partnership with LiftOff kept us afloat during Irene," Kurz said. "What was working were the Microsoft servers that hosted Microsoft services. We were able to coordinate and get to everything we needed to do, including e-mail, because everyone still had their cell phones. We had people going to a variety of different places — anywhere they could find Internet connectivity — and they could continue to do their work.. The cloud was the only service that was still working."

"During the hurricane, our Microsoft cloud systems were up and running," Kurz

said. "I actually set up e-mail accounts while on the phone, dialed in to a recurring leadership staff meeting we had the first couple of days to maintain situational awareness. They were in Annapolis; I was sitting at my in-laws' in Delaware."

## One Size Fits All

With nearly 100 deployments in the books, LiftOff has yet to encounter a single cookie-cutter situation. The next one is never exactly like the previous. Each client brings unique challenges to their deployment and all are met in the Cloud, using Microsoft technology.

"There are six bundled collaboration packages available and everything is available à la carte. There are also add-on options, such as archiving and encryption to match requirements for any type of client. We help our customers understand the options and make good choices, not only about the products, but also about the deployment processes."

LiftOff's customers are as varied as the services offered. In addition to small and medium businesses, LiftOff works with all manner of clients, from state and local governments and their contractors, to not-for-profits and charities to law, healthcare and medical firms. Office 365 works for very small organization, as well as large organizations.

All organizations have a need for some level of security, scalability and reliability. Mobile connectivity is a critical component for many as well."Office 365 is great for users that travel," Reilly said. "Not only can can they check their e-mails, but they also can access documents and collaborate with colleagues through SharePoint"

Nearly every cloud customer has reliability and security concerns. LiftOff helps them to an answer in the cloud.

"It's important for these organizations to have a super secure system, and to not have to worry about viruses or hacking," Reilly said. "Email is going to be up. I don't think you can get that guarantee on any on-premise system."

## Enjoying the rewards

LiftOff has realized incredible success in the cloud and anticipates that businesses will continue to migrate away from self-hosted and self-managed systems.

"The Microsoft products continue to get better," Braatz said. "Microsoft is clearly invested long term in the Cloud and we are seeing consistent product enhancements. I believe that Office 365 is the absolute best option out there on the market