

Case Study: Ecometrica

By Gillian Law 27 July 2012

Business has grown steadily for online environmental accounting firm Ecometrica since its launch in 2008. The company's initial greenhouse gas accounting platform, Our Impacts, has been joined by a real-time web mapping platform, Our Ecosystem - both developed, built and hosted on Amazon's EC2 cloud.

Without the cloud, a small company like Ecometrica would never have been able to establish itself, says operations director Gary Davis.

"Ten years ago, we couldn't have done this. Using Amazon's EC2 means that a small business like ours can do this at relatively low cost - and as the business grows and customers use the products, it scales dynamically. And you only pay for what you use," he says.

Davis and CEO Richard Tipper started out as environmental accounting consultants, but quickly recognised the need for quality online products for their clients.

Our Impacts, the company's first product, is "a bit like a financial accounting software platform, but for carbon rather than finance," Davis says. Users track their energy, travel, waste, water and carbon use.

The recently released Our Ecosystem "looks like Google maps to the untrained

eye", but lets users build up complex layered maps of data to look at land use, where resources are coming from and what impact that has.

"There aren't any other products on the market yet that let you put both vector and raster data in the cloud and interrogate it in real time. There are some products that let you do similar work, but if you run a query then you've got to go and have a cup of coffee, or go for lunch! What we've managed to crack is actually doing that while you're sitting in front of the screen," Davis says.

It's the use of high-powered cloud servers - plus some clever programming - that allows Ecometrica to offer this analysis in real time.

The simple-to-use system requires no complex training for users, Davis says, and yet is "incredibly powerful" in the information it can supply. The results are useful to an organisation keeping an eye on its environmental impact - whether for its own internal compliance or to prove compliance to regulators.

"It's also used to communicate with customers, and that's important. Everyone talks about how sustainable they are, but there's often little evidence to support the claims," says Davis. "What both our software products do is put some substance

behind that, proper numbers that can be audited and prove that it's not just 'greenwash'."

One biofuel customer, for example, publishes Our Ecosystem data on the web, allowing its own clients to look at where products have been sourced.

"Each individual sugar cane mill, for instance, in Brazil, or in North America - anyone can interrogate it to see what the change in land based carbon has been over the past five years in the areas surrounding the mills, for example."

To create this product on its own servers would have cost Ecometrica "at least ten times the amount we're spending, I'd expect," says Davis, and the time to market would have been a much bigger issue.

"You can just build these things so rapidly. We would have been tinkering for two or three years, whereas with Amazon it was six months to get that main product out the door and in front of clients to be tested. Speed to market is incredibly important in the carbon accounting market, which is very competitive," he says.

The market is also very cyclical, another aspect that suits cloud computing. "Particularly on the greenhouse gas accounting side, it tends to mirror the financial accounting year, so we have a similar rush to accountants in that first quarter," Davis says.

The company has worked with Amazon from the beginning and sees no reason to change supplier - service, reliability and security have all been impressive. The recent downtime due to storms in the US was fortunately on a Friday evening, UK time, so had little impact on Ecometrica's service, "and obviously Amazon has huge teams that can get things back up and running quickly."

Ecometrica's CTO, Éric St-Jean, has ensured that all of Ecometrica's work remains portable and could be moved to another supplier, or hosted on its own servers if that was necessary, Davis says.

St Jean also keeps tight control of cloud sprawl and constantly monitors how the company can save money and better manage its cloud estate, Davis says.

"It's a question of understanding how our clients use the products and how that might scale, so that we can plan how best to manage. You've got to have the right people to do that, and Éric is very organised and on top of this stuff," he says.

Ecometrica continues to grow, and recently opened a third office, in London. The company initially had offices in Edinburgh and Montreal, but decided a sales presence in London would be a useful development, as most clients are headquartered in the South East. London is likely to become an even more important market as new rules on mandatory carbon reporting are brought in for firms on the London Stock Exchange - currently 1800 companies and likely to expand to as many as 30,000 by 2016.

The benefits of Ecometrica's software products are being recognised by an increasing number of users, says Davis, and the company is confident of growth - and confident it can handle that growth, based on its cloud infrastructure.

"[Cloud] is excellent, really. It means that a relatively small business like ours can do this at low cost, and scale as business grows," he says.

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