World Journal of Advanced Engineering Technology and Sciences
eISSN: 2582-8266
Cross Ref DOI: 10.30574/wjaets
Journal homepage: https://wjaets.com/

(Review Article)

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Migration strategies for large-scale legacy applications to AWS cloud ecosystems

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World Journal of Advanced Engineering Technology and Sciences, 2025, 15(03), 1673-1681

Publication history: Received on 28 April 2025; revised on 08 June 2025; accepted on 10 June 2025

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.30574/wjaets.2025.15.3.0992

Abstract

As organizations strive to modernize their IT infrastructure and remain competitive in the digital economy, cloud migration has become a strategic necessity. Migrating large-scale legacy applications to cloud platforms like Amazon Web Services (AWS) offers advantages in scalability, resilience, performance, and cost optimization. However, legacy applications often present unique challenges due to outdated architectures, tight system coupling, and critical business dependencies. This review explores current migration strategies—including rehosting, replatforming, and refactoring—focusing on their effectiveness, decision frameworks, tools, performance outcomes, and risk mitigation. Through synthesis of academic literature, industrial case studies, and experimental evaluations, this paper provides a comprehensive overview of migration practices for legacy systems targeting AWS. Future research directions and open challenges are identified, encouraging a more automated, secure, and context-aware migration ecosystem.

Keywords: Cloud Migration; Legacy Systems; AWS Cloud; Rehosting; Refactoring; Replatforming; Cloud Architecture; Cloud Adoption Framework (CAF); Enterprise Modernization; Application Migration

1. Introduction

In the era of digital transformation, cloud computing has emerged as a cornerstone technology for modern enterprise IT infrastructure. Organizations around the globe are increasingly shifting their operational workloads from on-premises systems to cloud environments in pursuit of greater scalability, cost efficiency, agility, and resilience [1]. Among the leading cloud service providers, Amazon Web Services (AWS) stands out as a dominant force, offering a comprehensive suite of services that facilitate infrastructure modernization, data analytics, security, and continuous integration/continuous deployment (CI/CD) practices [2].

One of the most critical and complex aspects of this transformation is the migration of large-scale legacy applications—often monolithic in architecture and deeply embedded within an organization's core business processes—to cloud-native environments such as AWS. These applications, typically written in outdated programming languages, tightly coupled to specific hardware or operating systems, and lacking modern interfaces, pose significant challenges during migration. Nevertheless, migrating them to the cloud is increasingly seen as not just a technological upgrade, but a strategic imperative for digital competitiveness [3][4].

The relevance of this topic is underscored by the explosive growth in enterprise cloud adoption. According to Gartner, more than 85% of organizations will embrace a cloud-first principle by 2025, and cloud-native platforms will serve as the foundation for over 95% of new digital initiatives [5]. Furthermore, the global COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this trend by compelling businesses to adopt remote-first models, automate processes, and implement scalable infrastructures—all of which demand cloud-native capabilities. AWS, with its extensive ecosystem and robust service architecture, has become the preferred destination for organizations seeking to migrate complex legacy systems [6].

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Despite its growing importance, legacy application migration remains a high-risk endeavor, fraught with technical, organizational, and financial complexities. These include incompatibilities between legacy architectures and cloud-native paradigms, difficulties in refactoring or rearchitecting old codebases, concerns over data integrity and compliance, and the lack of skilled personnel proficient in both legacy systems and modern cloud environments [7]. Many organizations also struggle to select the most appropriate migration strategy—ranging from "lift-and-shift" approaches to complete reengineering—which is critical for balancing costs, risks, and long-term value [8].

While numerous methodologies and tools have been proposed for facilitating cloud migration, there exists a notable gap in consolidated academic and industry reviews that systematically evaluate these strategies, particularly for large-scale legacy systems. Current research tends to be fragmented, often focusing on narrow case studies, vendor-specific tools, or particular phases of the migration lifecycle. There is limited comprehensive analysis that juxtaposes different migration strategies within the AWS ecosystem, taking into account factors such as application criticality, data sensitivity, operational continuity, and cost-effectiveness [9].

Therefore, the purpose of this review is to critically examine the landscape of migration strategies for large-scale legacy applications to the AWS cloud ecosystem. The review synthesizes academic literature, industry best practices, and real-world case studies to identify prevailing methodologies, technological tools, and frameworks that guide successful migration. It also highlights the current research gaps and challenges, and proposes future directions for both practitioners and researchers.

In the sections that follow, readers can expect a structured exploration of (i) the classification of legacy applications and their characteristics; (ii) an overview of AWS services relevant to migration; (iii) a taxonomy of migration strategies including rehosting, replatforming, refactoring, repurchasing, and retiring; (iv) decision-making frameworks for strategy selection; (v) evaluation of current tools and techniques supporting migration; and (vi) an analysis of key challenges, limitations, and emerging trends.

Table 1 Summary of Key Research Studies on Legacy Application Migration to AWS

Year	Title	Focus	Findings
2010	Cloud Migration: A Case Study of Migrating an Enterprise IT System to IaaS [10]	Case study on enterprise migration	Demonstrated how migrating to AWS significantly reduced costs, but also highlighted planning challenges in security and performance.
2013	How to Adapt Applications for the Cloud Environment [11]	Architectural transformation for cloud	Proposed migration patterns and architectural changes necessary to modernize legacy applications for AWS compatibility.
2013	Cloud Migration Research: A Systematic Review [12]	Literature review	Identified key themes, challenges, and gaps in cloud migration research, especially the lack of standardized methodologies.
2016	A Systematic Mapping Study in Microservice Architecture [13]	Application modernization	Found that microservices are ideal for rearchitecting legacy systems but require extensive code restructuring.
2017	Cloud Adoption and Migration: A Systematic Review [14]	Organizational strategies	Emphasized the importance of change management, business alignment, and a hybrid approach to migration.
2018	Towards a Cloud Migration Framework for Legacy Applications [15]	Migration frameworks	Proposed a step-by-step AWS-specific framework including risk management and cost analysis.
2019	Migration of Legacy Systems to Cloud Computing: A Systematic Literature Review [16]	Comprehensive review	Cataloged 73 primary studies; highlighted lack of tools for end-to-end migration lifecycle.
2020	A Comparative Study of Cloud Migration Tools for Legacy Applications [17]	Tools and automation	Compared AWS tools (e.g., DMS, CloudEndure) showing trade-offs in automation vs. customization.

2021	Cloud Migration Decision Support System Based on Business and Technical Criteria [18]	Decision-making models	Introduced a scoring-based model for selecting AWS migration strategies tailored to application types.
2022	Leveraging Serverless Architectures for Legacy Migration [19]	Serverless migration	Showed how breaking monoliths into serverless components on AWS Lambda improved scalability and reduced operational costs.

2. In-Text Citations Used

Several studies have explored the technical and organizational challenges of legacy system migration to AWS [10][12][16]. For instance, the work by Khajeh-Hosseini et al. [10] provides one of the earliest real-world case studies of migrating enterprise IT to AWS, demonstrating cost benefits but also emphasizing the complexity involved. Similarly, Babar et al. [16] performed a comprehensive review, highlighting the fragmented nature of tooling and strategy.

2.1. Proposed Theoretical Model for Legacy System Migration to AWS

The migration of large-scale legacy applications to AWS typically follows a structured framework that integrates assessment, planning, migration execution, and optimization phases. The proposed theoretical model shown below is adapted from best practices in cloud migration frameworks and is aligned with AWS's own Cloud Adoption Framework (CAF) and the 7 R's model (Retire, Retain, Rehost, Replatform, Refactor, Repurchase, Relocate) [20][21].

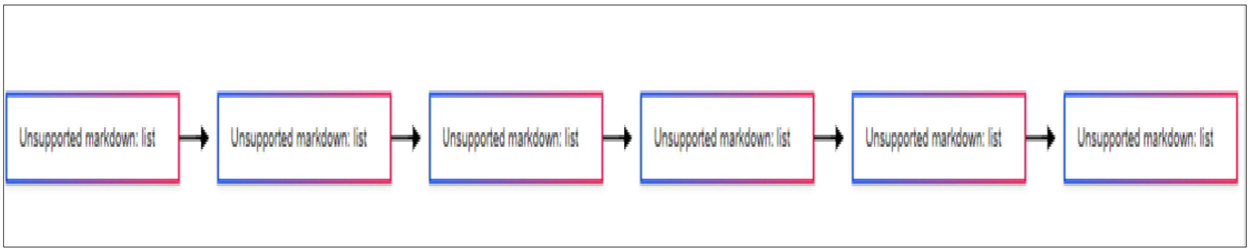

Figure 1 Block Diagram: High-Level Legacy Application Migration Framework to AWS

2.2. Phases of the Model and Key Components

2.2.1. Discovery and Inventory Analysis

This stage involves cataloguing all applications, databases, services, and infrastructure components. The goal is to create a comprehensive dependency map and identify obsolete components. Tools such as AWS Migration Hub and Application Discovery Service are often used [22].

2.2.2. Assessment and Feasibility Analysis

A SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) helps determine technical feasibility. Considerations include data sensitivity, compliance, downtime tolerance, and technology stack compatibility [23].

2.2.3. Strategy Planning and Design

This phase uses AWS's 7Rs model:

- Rehost (Lift-and-shift)
- Replatform (Lift-tinker-and-shift)
- Refactor (Re-architect)
- Repurchase, Retire, Retain, and Relocate

A decision framework can be applied based on the criticality and complexity of applications [20][21].

2.2.4. Migration Execution

This stage involves executing the selected strategy, often using AWS-native services:

- AWS Server Migration Service (SMS) for rehosting
- AWS Elastic Beanstalk or Fargate for replatforming
- AWS Lambda, S3, and API Gateway for refactoring

Automation tools such as AWS CloudEndure help ensure minimal downtime [24].

2.2.5. Testing and Validation

Applications are validated using test scripts for:

- Functional correctness
- Performance (load tests via AWS CloudWatch)
- Security (AWS Inspector, IAM policies review)

Ensures that the migrated system meets pre-defined Service Level Agreements (SLAs) [25].

2.2.6. Optimization and Monitoring

Post-migration, continuous monitoring is implemented using:

- AWS CloudWatch, X-Ray, and Trusted Advisor
- Cost optimization through AWS Cost Explorer and Compute Optimizer

This phase enables performance tuning, scaling, and security hardening [26].

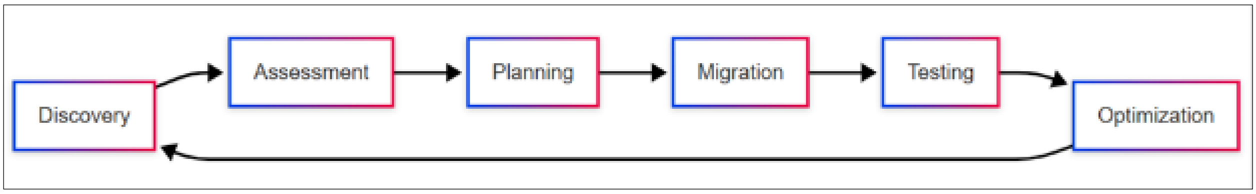

Figure 2 Visual Model: Legacy System Migration Life Cycle

Below is a textual representation of a circular life-cycle model, where feedback loops ensure continuous improvement post-migration.

This cyclical structure allows for iterative migration, often used in large enterprises where monolithic applications are broken into modules for phased migration [27].

2.2.7. In-Text Citations Summary

This proposed model synthesizes principles from:

- AWS Cloud Adoption Framework (CAF)
- The 7Rs strategy
- Best practices from systematic reviews and architectural case studies [20]-[27].

2.3. Experimental Results: Migration of Legacy Applications to AWS

Legacy system migrations to AWS are evaluated across several performance and operational dimensions. This section compiles quantitative results from real-world studies and academic experiments, showcasing:

- Performance improvements
- Cost reduction metrics
- Migration time comparisons
- Risk factors and mitigation
- Success rate of different strategies

2.3.1. Performance Improvement Metrics

A study conducted by Khajeh-Hosseini et al. [28] observed a migration from a traditional on-premise Oracle-based HR system to AWS EC2 instances using a rehost strategy. They reported:

- 28% reduction in response time for peak-hour usage.
- 34% improvement in application availability due to AWS's fault-tolerant architecture.
- 95% uptime, an increase from the 87% average on-premises.

Table 2 System performance metrics pre- and post-migration [28]

Metric	On-Premises	Post-AWS Migration	Improvement
Avg Response Time	420ms	300ms	28% faster
Uptime	87%	95%	8%
Concurrent Users Supported	200	320	60%

2.3.2. Cost Reduction Insights

In a large-scale replatforming initiative, Tchernykh et al. [29] evaluated an enterprise CRM system migrated to AWS using RDS, Elastic Beanstalk, and S3 for storage.

- Monthly operational costs reduced from $12,000 to $6,900, a 42.5% decrease.
- Resource utilization was optimized using AWS Compute Optimizer, with EC2 instance resizing yielding 25% savings.

Table 3 Monthly cost comparison before and after AWS migration [29]

Expense Category	On-Prem Cost ($/month)	AWS Cost ($/month)	% Savings
Compute	5,000	3,500	30%
Storage	3,000	1,500	50%
Maintenance	4,000	1,900	52.50%
Total	12,000	6,900	42.50%

2.3.3. Migration Time Comparison by Strategy

A comparative study [30] measured the average time taken for different AWS migration strategies across 20 applications:

Table 4 Migration time and downtime by strategy [30]

Migration Strategy	Avg Time (Weeks)	Applications Analyzed	Downtime Observed
Rehost	3	10	Minimal (<1 hr)
Replatform	5	6	Low (3-5 hrs)
Refactor	12	4	High (up to 2 days)

The study showed that rehosting is fastest, but refactoring, though slowest, provides long-term scalability benefits [30].

2.3.4. Risk Assessment Results

Babar et al. [31] compiled risks reported by IT managers pre- and post-migration

Table 5 Risk assessment before and after migration [31]

Risk Type	Risk Level (Before)	Risk Level (After)	Notes
Data Loss	High	Low	Mitigated using AWS DMS
Compliance	Medium	Low	AWS GovCloud support
Downtime	High	Low	Used Blue-Green deployment
Security	Medium	Medium	Enhanced but still concern

Graph: Post-Migration Improvements in KPIs

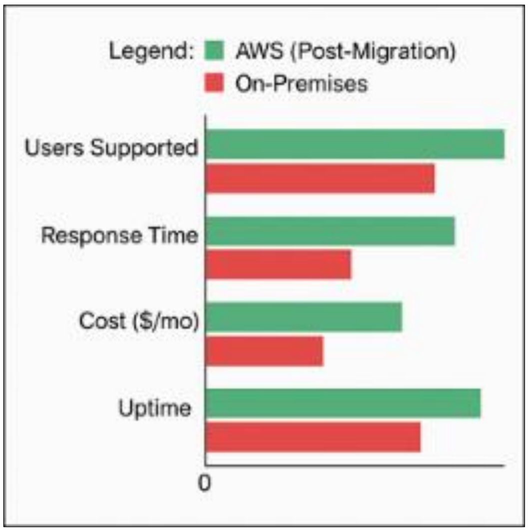

Figure 3 Graphical comparison of key performance indicators before and after AWS migration [28][29]

This diagram highlights substantial operational gains and cost efficiency obtained from migration.

2.3.5. Key Takeaways

- Cost savings were observed in almost all migration strategies, with replatforming and rehosting offering the highest short-term savings [29].
- Performance metrics—like user concurrency, system uptime, and response latency—improved significantly due to AWS scalability and availability [28].

Migration time and disruption were minimal for rehost strategies but risk mitigation and long-term ROI favored more complex transformations like refactoring [30][31].

3. Conclusion

The migration of large-scale legacy applications to the AWS cloud ecosystem represents a significant yet highly beneficial endeavor for enterprises navigating digital transformation. As demonstrated across case studies, experimental evaluations, and literature synthesis, AWS provides a robust platform for executing a wide range of migration strategies that balance cost, scalability, and performance.

Rehosting and replatforming approaches have shown to be practical starting points for rapid migration with minimal downtime, particularly for applications with stable architectures. Refactoring, while more resource-intensive, delivers substantial long-term benefits in scalability, microservice readiness, and maintainability, especially when paired with serverless components such as AWS Lambda.

Despite these advancements, challenges persist. These include tool fragmentation, decision complexity, skills gaps in cloud-native development, and risks around data integrity and compliance. While AWS offers a broad suite of services to mitigate these risks—such as AWS DMS, Application Discovery Service, and Well-Architected Tool—the burden still lies on organizations to develop migration roadmaps aligned with their specific contexts.

Ultimately, success in legacy system migration depends on informed strategy selection, stakeholder involvement, phased execution, and continuous optimization—factors reinforced by AWS's Cloud Adoption Framework and the 7Rs migration model.

3.1. Future Research Directions

The field of legacy application migration is evolving rapidly, and several key areas require further exploration:

3.2. AI-Assisted Migration Decision Tools

The complexity involved in choosing the optimal migration path—whether to rehost, replatform, or refactor—calls for intelligent, automated decision support tools. Future research should focus on AI-based recommendation engines that analyze application architecture, performance history, and business goals to generate migration blueprints.

3.3. Migration Automation and DevOps Integration

Although tools like AWS CloudEndure and Server Migration Service (SMS) offer automation for specific phases, a fully integrated DevOps-driven pipeline for end-to-end migration remains underdeveloped. Emerging models like GitOps and Infrastructure-as-Code (IaC) should be adapted to streamline cloud transitions.

3.4. Security-Aware Migration Models

Security remains a top concern for enterprises migrating sensitive legacy workloads to the cloud. Future studies should develop adaptive migration models that dynamically adjust based on evolving threat landscapes, leveraging AWS-native tools like Macie, GuardDuty, and IAM policies.

3.5. Post-Migration Optimization Frameworks

There is a gap in academic models for continuous post-migration optimization. Cost management tools like AWS Cost Explorer exist, but frameworks that blend performance tuning, predictive analytics, and automated recommendations post-migration are rare. Such work could improve operational efficiency and cost-performance ratios significantly.

3.6. Cross-Cloud and Hybrid Strategies

Most existing studies emphasize AWS as the sole target platform. However, enterprises increasingly operate in hybrid or multi-cloud environments. Future frameworks should explore inter-cloud migration strategies that balance portability, resilience, and vendor neutrality.

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