

the
Viewpoint

business

The Business of Getting the Most Out of the Cloud

Q What contract vehicles are best for agencies to use in time of budget uncertainty?

A GSA Schedule 70 probably gives the most flexibility, and almost every vendor in the federal marketplace is represented on it. Getting new products onto the schedule is a lot faster than with Governmentwide Acquisition Contracts (GWACs), and multiple vendors already include capacity-on-demand, something several agencies are already using for storage, servers and infrastructure. After the GSA schedule, then agencies should look to their own GWACs if they have them. Those agencies somewhere in-between can either look to the GSA schedule or team with agencies that have a capacity-on-demand contract. That way they don't have to go through a separate procurement and ordering is simplified and product delivery faster.



Tom Frana, president and CEO, VION Corporation

Q Agencies have been increasingly looking to the cloud and shared services to cost-effectively meet their needs. Should they accelerate their use?

A For smaller agencies with low data security requirements, I think the public cloud offering from GSA could have huge benefits, saving them the need to build their own infrastructure. The bigger agencies with more sensitive data are looking to build private clouds. It may be the time for the idea of IT as a utility to come to the fore. If you look at the Defense Information Systems Agency (DISA), for example, all of its contracts are now for capacity services delivered through the cloud, which is basically a utility model. It's a big change for agencies, but if budgets and capex dollars continue to decline, I think it will happen a lot quicker than people expect.

Q Even before the threat of sequestration, agencies have been prioritizing which IT programs to focus on under budget constraints. Do they need to do more?

A Every contracting officer and those involved in the budget cycle I've talked to in the past year have done studies about what they will do if they have X, Y or Z budgets. What they are asking for is the ability to pick and choose where the cuts are made. If they are given that latitude they'll be in fairly decent shape, but if they have to make across the board cuts under sequestration, they'll have to scramble at least some of the time to deal with them.

Q Do agencies have sufficient tools to allow them to monitor and manage their IT investments under sequestration?

A It's uncertainty in the marketplace and the federal budgeting process that renders current tools somewhat ineffective. But I don't think there's anything else out there that can help agencies more. The more mature agencies have used the tools they have to see what happens if budgets are cut by certain amounts. Once sequestration and things like the continuing resolution are settled, they'll take whatever comes out of the back-end and map it to the work they've already done.

Q Is there anything else that might help agencies, either through legislation or regulation?

A The amount of GWACs out there probably served the needs of the marketplace at one time, but if GSA Schedule 70 was highlighted as the place to go for low pricing and competitive bids that would be a much more effective way for government to drive things if it's looking for savings. Also, there has to be a concern that, as the pressure to reduce costs increases the pressure on big businesses to be more price aggressive, they might end up just doing away with their subcontractors. So I think there's a need to protect small businesses from being excluded.

the Viewpoint
technology

Virtualization solutions

Q With data volumes exploding, storage can quickly become a bottleneck. How can agencies deal with this cost-effectively?

A Customers are increasingly buying in increments of petabytes of storage, and that's a much bigger challenge than managing a terabyte here and there. The performance characteristics of the drives can't keep up, and then you do introduce bottlenecks. The answer is intelligent storage subsystems. You can have different types of drives that spin at different speeds. An intelligent controller, based on user policies and guidelines and a little bit of intelligence as it learns how you access data, places that data on the appropriate drive or storage tier. This can actually save people money by moving data to where it needs to be to optimize overall performance. This applies whether the servers are physical or virtualized. Virtualization tends to overcommit physical servers in collapsing them down to just a few, and then you have to aggregate all of that I/O to the storage subsystem. Automated tiering provides an answer for preventing the bottlenecks.



Carl Fulp, chief technology officer, ViON Corporation

Q Since virtualization is touted as a way for organizations to get more from the IT resources they already have, should agencies be using it more?

A Virtualized solutions do tend to be more complex. But, anytime you reduce the number of physical drives you have to manage, you also reduce administrator costs as well as driving the physical utilization higher, which further reduces acquisition and environmental costs. Some folks have found virtualization to be much more expensive than they expected, and some have probably gone through virtualization and over committed the physical resources. But, as the underlying platform becomes so much more capable, and agencies are pressured to manage budget and acquisition costs even more closely, virtualization is the obvious way to go.

Q How will open source technology fit into this? Should agencies be increasing their use of it?

A They could be doing much more. There are some interesting storage solutions that are based on open source, for example. So, instead of buying proprietary solutions from OEMs, they could be buying open source software and rolling their own storage systems. Open source systems are not as feature rich as proprietary systems, and if you end up modifying them extensively it might have been better to stay with the proprietary solutions. But open source is free and, in today's environment, you just can't ignore that.

Q How does the need for greater security fit with these more complex environments?

A We began providing encryption capabilities in our storage subsystems some time ago. So, data arrives at our subsystems and is encrypted before it's stored on the disk. We also moved on to encrypting data flowing between the servers and storage, and we've looked at providing encryption capability at the servers themselves. The good thing is that, when you get to the storage layer, security costs aren't a huge issue.

Q How do hot button issues such as Big Data and Bring Your Own Device affect the mix?

A We tried standardizing on a particular phone in our own company, but every other person was bringing in a different phone regardless. BYOD does have some broad challenges for sure, but for us employee productivity is the end goal. Sometimes you have to bend to the pressure of what employees think makes them productive. Big Data is something that the industry is already dealing with, to some extent. Automated tiering will provide some of the answers. You'll also be seeing a move within the industry to improving the communication between storage systems and servers through storage solutions that are placed in the servers themselves.

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