

Fanning the Flames of Innovation:

A Q&A with Industry Experts



We sat down with ViON's Rob Davies, EVP of Operations, Rick Kryger, Deputy CIO, Operations & Acting Director, U.S. Department of Labor and Sandy Krawchuk, Group Vice President, North America Public Sector, Cloud Infrastructure, Oracle Corporation to discuss how to best manage modernization requirements across the public sector and in federal government, including data center consolidation, data center optimization, migrating applications to the cloud and the key considerations every agency leader should be evaluating.

Q: What are some of the challenges you've confronted as you've tried to balance the drive for modernization against the technology refresh/maintenance cycle?

Sandy Krawchuk: You have to triage the three situations that most IT organizations are in: essentially keeping the lights on while not getting into technical debt, but also thinking with clear eyes about what the next paradigm is going to be. It could be many things — a major rewrite or a total re-platforming of an operation or back to a new business process that's going to radically change the IT underpinnings. It's not for the faint of heart, and it's difficult for customers to keep the balance. At any given time, maybe at any given fiscal period, one of those three areas takes the back seat to the other two. And unfortunately, what I see quite frequently is a real commitment by an executive team to move forward on a major goal, and the whack-a-mole occurs sometimes in an unfortunate way, where the debt accumulates to the point where it becomes a critical need in a very short time frame. That's when being able to balance the modernization of an environment versus essential sustainment becomes difficult. And unfortunately, sometimes that means technology gets thrown in the category of "old" and "why do we have it?" when in fact, there are some really strong strategies that can be deployed to keep that environment modernized.

Q: How is the President's management agenda and the cross-agency priorities impacting how you look at IT and how you look at this modernization effort?

Rick Kryger: The president's management agenda is core to our planning. It's a structure of accountability and how the OMB and the White House view the ways agencies are performing in different areas. We also have to take into account localized priorities. The Secretary of Labor sets certain priorities internally, and then each mission agency within the Department of Labor has specific priorities that are relevant to their area, whether it's the Bureau of Labor Statistics, OSHA, etc.

Sandy Krawchuk: I've seen several governments use the demand for modernization and optimization as a rationale to move toward more consolidation. For example, the State of New York has dramatically consolidated their agencies from 28-30 years ago to one central IT organization within state government. The federal government within Canada, although much smaller than the U.S., has embarked upon a shared services environment with a single view of the citizen. Those are really "moonshot" kind of approaches. But it's a start and it has driven great dialogue in terms of modernization and accommodation because they take a look at the whole real estate of their environment and figure out how to drive more value from all those pieces.

Rick Kryger: The Department of Labor is actually in the process of implementing an IT shared services model where effectively the IT work that has been traditionally held within each agency is going through a reorganization to gain those exact benefits that we've seen happen elsewhere in other layers of government and in the private sector to bring that together.

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Rob Davies, ViON EVP of Operations

Q: What do you see among government agencies as you look at procurement methods to refresh technology?

Rob Davies: Agencies are really open to different acquisition strategies to support modernizing faster. Leasing is a method we've all worked with that's been around for years, and today, the objective would be to move away from leasing and bring the public cloud model to the federal data center. The goal is to provide a public cloud-like experience on premise with technology that the agency gets to choose. We've spent a lot of time working on that at ViON, and we've watched a customer of ours radically transform how they acquire technology on behalf of their mission partners. The speed at which they acquire has increased. The flexibility they have in adding different technologies to meet their mission partners' requirements have increased. But they've also eliminated over-buying, and they've been able to moderate their pace of buying.

If you can bring that together, you can deliver a much more effective service to your customers and help accomplish some of these over-arching strategies, while reducing the "gray costs." The amount of time contracting officers have to spend on individual acquisition goes down, because they can get the technology they want as-a-Service, and avoid constantly having to evaluate technologies as well as spending on maintenance – particularly for a piece of equipment that could be sitting in a warehouse somewhere.

Sandy Krawchuk: I think there's a general consensus that procuring anything in the federal government is hard, and IT is even harder still. It has to have a lifecycle, and oftentimes, current procurement strategies don't really allow for that.

There's a real desire from our customers to abstract the hardware purchase in some manner so that's the hard part that happens maybe one time, and the as-a-Service model, provides, a "container" so that the services for compute, storage, back-up, recovery are delivered in a very flexible model and the underlying infrastructure can be moved in and out. In this way the customers don't really have to worry about that on a day-to-day basis, and they can focus on other priorities like delivering the applications to the end users.

They're looking for a more flexible, agile solution to do that that's cloud-enabled. We've seen an environment growing, called cloud adjacency. They work in concert with one of the data center providers and then use the connectors to the cloud to do what makes sense in the cloud. They keep their very important data resident within an owned environment, and it's the best of all worlds.

Q: What have you seen as the practical impact of acquiring technology on a subscription basis and how do you think that might work for enterprise IT?

Rick Kryger: In looking more at as-a-Service, procurement capabilities rather than purchasing by component, mobile device management and mobile phones is a prime example. Now companies provide the capability to acquire all of it as-a-Service. So the labor and costs that go into managing the overall service might be more efficiently procured as a single package instead of a series of pieces.

The same thing can apply to other types of technology - even examples within the cloud infrastructure, where you've got certain database capabilities. You can simply spin up any type of database and get support. All you have to do is put your schema and data in so you can offload all the infrastructure management and service management around that database capability.

Rob Davies: In the past, agencies were overbuying. They couldn't forecast who would need what as they tried to consolidate operational capability in the name of efficiency. They then decided they had to change how they bought technology. I think the public cloud has challenged everyone's perception about what's possible, and it's really that sort of service innovation that came out of DoD and a few companies that got started in that early, like ViON, have turned it into a business, and an operational concept to help implement new strategies to get to the cloud, put the right workload on the right platform and leverage speed and agility to help improve effectiveness.

Q: What are you seeing as ways the federal government and some of your customers are implementing these strategies, and what are some of the obstacles to that change?

Sandy Krawchuk: We're seeing several customers who are choosing to implement the as-a-Service model to free up more resources for working on the enhancements to environments, as well as those "moonshot" larger projects. It's a way to essentially keep the lights on and deliver what you need to as you figure out how to get to the next level.

Q: As we talk about critical systems we have to modernize. What about SPARC? It's effectively like a mainframe and runs a lot of critical workloads in the government today. How do you modernize that capability?

Sandy Krawchuk: We still see the install base for SPARC. A lot of the systems and the applications that are running on SPARC have been doing so for quite some time, silently and correctly, and with good reliability, and as a result, they tend to take the personality of the phone line. If you have a landline in your house - you're always going to get a dial tone. As a result, these systems are like the silent soldiers. They're there all the time and sometimes don't get the attention for how they can play into a modernized environment. People may ask "why do we still have them around?" I tell our customers SPARC is here to stay.

The operating system [Solaris] is certified by Oracle and will continue to be supported until 2034. The point is - there's a pathway for chip design for improvements to the architecture for years to come. Customers who are facing a modernized environment with systems that are many generations old are staring at the dreaded letter from the manufacturer or the software provider saying, you're going to be out of support, and suddenly the emergency occurs. We've been working with customers to show how they can ramp up and take advantage of consolidation on much higher efficiency systems compared to what they may have bought years ago. The processing capability is there, as well as the extensibility within single racks to handle a crazy amount of workload.

Rob Davies: In that classic balance between operations maintenance and dev ops, right, SPARC is a great example of accumulating that legacy debt, and if you get that into an as-a-Service model, you can modernize and consolidate. It's an operational model that can keep that going for the next five to ten years, because of how stable it is.

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