

Look Who's MeriTalking: ViON's Rob Davies and Andy Flick on Improving Federal IT Effectiveness With Multi-Cloud

MeriTalk recently connected with ViON's Rob Davies, chief operating officer, and Andy Flick, director of cloud services, to discuss how multi-cloud initiatives, alongside new ways of thinking about IT procurement, can transform Federal IT infrastructure.

MeriTalk: What does the most recent FITARA scorecard tell us about IT modernization progress? And from your perspectives, what's needed?

Davies: The scores tell us the FITARA-graded agencies have taken the legislation seriously. But we have a long way to go to realize the ultimate objective of achieving more consistent modernization across government. We know agencies are building on data center consolidation and optimization initiative progress – expanding cloud ecosystems, and bringing in elements of Technology Business Management (TBM).

As we know, cloud isn't just a technology offering, it's also a business and operating model. Implementing cloud models – public, private, and on-premise – offers the greatest capability to modernize while leveraging the promise of each platform.

On-premise private clouds are the right choice for some, but not all workloads. Fundamentally, they can help agencies manage risk by diversifying operations and avoiding consolidation into one platform. They augment historical investments with new technology and simplify operations by streamlining procurement, allowing technology teams to focus on the agency mission. If agencies can move in this direction, they will run the appropriate workloads on the correct platform, balance

spending and performance, and improve internal operations and their FITARA scorecards.

Flick: The scorecard simplifies a complex and interconnected set of IT, financial, and business issues. The score is an indicator. By focusing on the grade alone, you're missing the larger view – the potential opportunity for significant improvement even if your agency has an "A" rating. The key intention of FITARA is to improve the management of IT from an operational, financial, and risk perspective.

Many agencies have made progress by identifying workloads they can move to the cloud, thereby reducing costs and increasing availability.

In addition to cloud, there has been a movement within a growing number of agencies to have a consumption-based IT on-premises *within* the government data center. These agencies are foregoing capital expenditure (CAPEX) purchases in favor of consumption-based services for compute and storage. Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent buying new equipment to increase capacity and/or technical replenishment of aging inventories. More Federal agencies and departments converting to a consumption-based model (similar to cloud) are reaping a huge windfall of improvement that isn't directly reflected in the FITARA scorecard.

MeriTalk: As we spoke with Federal IT leaders throughout 2020, many shared challenges with scaling to meet unexpected requirements, quickly. What have you seen?

Flick: Some education is needed on ways to buy consumption-based services. Agencies are learning how to manage workloads in the new cloud reality, and they are using lessons learned to innovate on how they buy and consume technology within their data centers. Two examples are the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Army Enterprise IT-as-a-Service programs. What these two departments and over 20 other agencies are doing is blazing the trail for prioritizing on-premises as-a-Service over government procurement and ownership of IT assets.

Davies: Every one of the agencies we have supported with on-premise private cloud deployments views these programs as a tremendous success. They get access to their technology faster. They can scale up or scale down without penalty. It has allowed them to focus more on their mission delivery instead of having to worry about how much technology they have to buy.

There are corresponding positive impacts for the procurement team, as well. They don't have to spend six months trying to buy the next storage upgrade or nine months trying to help their customer procure a converged solution. They get much more time back to support more complex and impactful acquisitions.

MeriTalk: IT environments are increasingly complex, with workloads being managed across on-premise data centers and hybrid multi-cloud environments. Considering this complexity, what do agencies need to do to manage and secure their data and infrastructure?

Flick: Agencies need skilled individuals to manage highly virtualized multi-cloud or hybrid cloud environments that are more complex and have more dependencies. IT teams must use new toolsets to provision, operate, monitor, and govern those environments. This can be challenging for agencies requiring managed services from contractors – the government just doesn't have the same access to human capital that industry does.

Davies: Instead of focusing employees on the legacy silos of storage, networking, and compute, you now have a new set of management milestones in the cloud. While it's not about the technology that you buy and deploy, it's about how the workload operates – whether in the cloud or on-premise.

IT leaders focus on connectivity and information delivery, not whether they have the right storage or compute technology and capacity. That also means the skillset needs are different. Rather than storage/compute/network skills, agencies need team members who understand how to manage workloads across

clouds. There is a real opportunity, and need, to retrain and refocus the IT workforce.

Flick: By using as-a-Service procurement, many agencies have regained valuable engineering time for their staff. Instead of running down quotes and double-checking exhaustive bills of materials before submitting their requirements to a months-long procurement process, engineers now have time to be engineers. They don't need to focus on workloads, performance, security, and availability. The agency's approach to IT procurement can reduce management and operational complexities and empower organizations to quickly adapt to new scenarios and take advantage of new technologies.

MeriTalk: How do the right management tools help Federal agencies achieve their strategic goals?

Flick: Every agency is looking for real-time data about their IT environment and I believe a clear distinction needs to be made between operational tools and management tools. What you measure and how you measure it is essential to be able to manage a datacenter. On the one hand, you need operational tools to monitor systems and networks and to perform root cause analyses when something goes wrong. You also need management tools that collect, correlate, and report information vital to the business of data centers.

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB)'s guidance on Technology Business Management and the focus of FITARA on real-time data visibility move the needle on the information gauge. Consumption-based, as-a-Service programs can provide the business and financial information to augment and transform data collected from operational tools into a collaborative platform of business, financial, and IT operations. Consider this question, "What does it cost the agency to maintain 99.995% uptime on a particular workload?" Or "What has our growth in data (not total disk capacity) been over the last six months? A year? three years?" Consumption-based IT provides the right management tools to answer these questions and more – to improve visibility, accountability, performance, and cost savings.

MeriTalk: What have been some of the most important lessons learned around managing multi-cloud environments?

Davies: We've learned agencies need a different set of management tools to manage their workloads in the cloud. IT teams may not be able to simply leverage the standard cloud dashboards from the cloud service providers. These standardized dashboards may not meet each agencies' unique requirements driven by

their legislative charters and regulatory directives. IT teams want to get the information they need in the correct format, not spend time translating from one data set to another.

Agency IT teams also need a clear picture of their cloud goals. Agencies may have to pay fees for accessing their data or moving it around the cloud, and significant fees for moving it out of the cloud. That's had some impact on budget and programs, and leaders need to consider the right mix of cloud models.

There have been agencies that have simply done these big lifts and shifts to the cloud and decided they are going to rationalize it later. That's a very expensive proposition, especially if you are lifting and shifting at scale. You can spend two or three times what you normally would have spent. Ultimately you need to have a plan, know your workload, and be familiar with how you're going to pay for those things.

Flick: There's a big difference between a set of operational tools, service management tools, and business management tools. Think about the CFO, the CIO, and other executives in the agency that need management insight into the business of IT. The CFO, the CIO, and others are trying to figure out how to comply with the mandates in DCOI, FITARA, TBM, and other guidance. Where do they get the data they need? How do they collect the data?

From the number of capacity orders a month to the forecast of capacity growth by program or across the agency to IT organization responsiveness – executives outside the data center increasingly need to see and be connected to information about the business of the data center.

ViON's management tools collect business information by program and across our contract. We connect that business data with asset information and service-level data that reflects our responsiveness to mission needs. We monitor the operation of equipment within data centers. So, we can always share our performance against all service level agreements, the number of incidents this month or this quarter, and what was ordered, delivered, and the billing status, at any time.

We aggregate this information into dashboards that provide visibility into cost pools, IT towers, applications, lines of business. This is the business of data centers. Without a veteran as-a-Service provider with an automation platform, that capability does not exist today.

I think it's a big, big difference between saying you want a management tool and an operational tool that reports on RAM consumption, CPU minutes, storage allocation, the number of VMs, or every network packet. Agencies want the bigger picture information that a management tool can provide – they want the top-down, drill-down view into the data center. We're on our third-generation as-a-Service automation platform that allows you to do exactly that – manage the business of data.

MeriTalk: As agencies continue to mature their IT environments, what are the most important impacts and benefits for agency missions?

Flick: Changing IT buying practices for government data centers is the first step towards improving measurable outcomes. The impact we've seen in agencies that have moved to as-a-Service or consumption-based models is huge. Their staffs have more meaningful jobs. Agency leaders have the information they need and when a new question arises, they have a service provider to help them. The agencies are now working with service providers whose contracts are *directly* tied to the outcomes needed to support mission requirements.

Information is power, and having real-time information about cost, quantity, availability, service levels, and quality is a powerful asset.

Davies: If IT teams have better visibility into IT resources, they can make better budget decisions and be more efficient. There is a domino effect. Agency staff writes fewer procurements. Contract administrators have fewer contracts to manage, so they can focus on more strategic acquisitions. IT leaders properly align and tune the organization so they spend less time comparing what technology is where, and more time supporting teams with the right tools. The focus is put exactly where it should be – on the mission.